

SPIKE

BADGER CLARK



*"After breakfast I worked myself over, scrubbing and shaving
and going through all the preparations for joy"*

SPIKE

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Author of "Sun and Saddle Leather"



BOSTON

RICHARD G. BADGER

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TO MOTHER

who, while I looked at the cold stream
and shivered, has always fixed her eyes
on the other shore and steadily pushed
me into the ford.

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S P I K E

I

THE LITTLE WIDOW

Skunks aint generally considered good society but, like most things, that depends. I abominated them animals without no reservations at the time the old man sent me up to bach alone and look after the cattle on the east ranch, and I didn't love the idea of having a skunk family under my kitchen floor, though I never would have knowed they were there if I hadn't heard them scratching around about their housekeeping of nights.

One evening when I was setting on the porch with my guitar and singing "El Ultimo Adios" to the scenery I took notice of a skunk strolling around the corner of the house. He was minding his own business and bothering nobody. He was better than me, for I went and set a steel trap under the corner of the porch. Next morning I found I had nailed him—fact is I knowed it

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perfectly well when something woke me up in the middle of the night, but I pulled an edge of the blanket over my nose and didn't investigate till daylight.

That skunk was a regular old he-one, the daddy of the tribe, though I didn't give no thought to his family connections at the time. I just stood off considerable and shot him, and toted him up the draw about a quarter, holding one front paw between my thumb and finger. I know trappers make good money on the hides, but I'm fussy in some ways. When I got back to the house I noticed that his memory still lingered around there pretty powerful, but I reckoned I could sleep, all right, by shutting the windows at that end.

Speaking of skunks, I saddled up that morning and rode over to Old Man Hempson's. Hempson and his two boys were the most onpopular outfit in the country. About

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the only friend they had was a low-down Mexican who packed firewood on burros from the hills to the Casa Blanca mines. That Mexican must have packed something besides firewood now and then, for we were only twenty miles from the line, and the Hempson outfit got drunk on contraband mescal every time the packer made them a visit, in spite of prohibition. There may be something stronger than that mescal—the United States Government or the law of gravity or something—but I doubt it. Once a Mexican I knowed, passing by the ranch, called me out and slipped me a bottle of it. I took just one little snifter and then, when I turned to go back to the house, I had five houses to choose from.

When I rode up to the Hempson ranch that morning the two boys and this Mexican were lolling by the door in the shade. One of the boys had a black eye and the

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Mexican's lip was cut and I took notice of an empty bottle on the floor inside. I how-died them, and the Mexican nodded and the boys growled. Then the old man's voice come from inside, asking who in eternal punishment was there. One of the boys says, "It's Spike Saddler." Then a bedspring skreaked inside and the old man come a-wabbling out, pulling the slack of his shirt over the butt of a sixshooter and looking uglier than—well, there aint nothing uglier than a plumb mean face with white hair at the top of it.

"Oh, it's Spike Saddler, is it?" he snarled. "Proud to meet you, Mr. Spike. And what do you mean by running my cattle off from your water corral, you—" then he give me all the compliments of the season before he stopped to draw breath.

I hadn't run off nobody's cattle. The old man was just saturated with high-explosive

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mescal and hard up for a fighting excuse. But I hadn't no deadlier weapon than the running iron on my saddle, and I aint no trouble hunter, so I answered him as meek and onoffensive as a baby cottontail that has started home to mama and popped into a rattlesnake den by mistake. We talked considerable then, the old man high and wild and me soft and low, and sometimes the boys would join in on the chorus. I wasn't staying there for the pleasure of their conversation, understand, but just because it made me skrinch to think of turning my back on them until I knowed more about their plans for my entertainment. Finally the old man promised, under oath, that as soon as they got time they would come down and duck me in my own tank and run me out of the country. That showed me there was no murder on their program for a minute or two, so I reined round and rode off.

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I growled about it a little and then laughed about it a little and then didn't think no more of it, for I knowed that when that extract of thunder and lightning had evaporated out through their good-for-nothing hides they would forget the whole thing. I had dinner with the JO Bar folks and then circulated round some more, took a look at the Bar O windmill, branded a couple of calves near the Six Mile Tree, and got home at sundown, singing "El Ultimo Adios" and feeling peaceable towards myself and all men.

It must have been about nine-thirty that night, when I was thumping on my guitar in the kitchen and wondering how Quakers made out to live without fighting in a world like this, when I heard something scratching round the back door. I laid my guitar on the table and opened the door and looked down. Something poked in between my boot heels—I thought it was one of the cats—



"Hempson and his two boys were the most onpopular outfit in the country"

THE LITTLE WIDOW

and then I looked again and my eyes hung out and I stepped away. I stepped about seven feet. It was a skunk, the widow of the one I had done away with in the morning.

There aint nothing bashful nor shrinking about a skunk. They always have the courage of their convictions and are sure of themselves. This one paid no more attention to me than if I had been a lizard on the wall, but walked right in and begun nosing round, looking for her departed mate or mebbe for a scrap of bacon rind. I slipped into the next room and dropped a couple of shells into the shotgun, and then I stopped to think. I liked that house and I wanted to live in it, so I didn't shoot. I didn't feel much like shooting, anyway. The widow looked so funny, waddling around in the lamplight so earnest and businesslike, with her shiny little eyes and her big bushy tail,

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that I couldn't get very mad, though I was naturally some nervous. I sidled round the wall of the kitchen and sneaked out the back door and set down on a juniper log in the back yard, with my gun across my knees, waiting for my lady caller to come out. Then I laughed. Most anybody would, I reckon.

Pretty pronto I heard the widow's little toenails clicking across the floor as she went into the setting-room. In that room were two black kittens asleep in my best rocker. I liked that chair but they seemed to like it more, so I generally let them have it. Ten seconds after the widow went in there I heard a growl and a spitting and them black kittens come a-busting out the back door, with their tails like rolling pins, and clawed onto my knees and snuggled up to me, all of a tremble. The thing was getting so good that it hurt—the plumb ridiculousness of that little two-pound waddler running me

THE LITTLE WIDOW

and my family out of house and home—and I set there with them shivering kittens in my lap and shook, and hiccupped, and wiped my eyes on my shirtsleeve.

Then I got serious for a minute. Up the draw I heard a yell and the clatter of two or three horses coming at a high lope. I knowed that yell—sort of thick, like the sound of a railroad whistle up north in cold weather. It was Old Man Hempson's voice. I guessed that their mescal and their appetite for trouble had lasted out the day and now they were a-coming down to keep their kind promise and run me out of the country. First I reckoned I had better make preparations to protect my home and honor. Then I thought a second and reckoned I would stand pat—or set pat—and I never moved a eyelash.

I will say one thing for the Hempsons that night. There was nothing sneakng

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nor thievish about the way they invaded my ranch. They would have fetched a brass band along if they could. Long before they got to the gate my pup on the front porch woke up and went into hysterics, but he was harmless and they knowed it, so he only helped out the riot.

The house was 'dobe and run sideways, Mexican fashion, with four rooms in a string like a sleeping car—the kitchen at one end with both doors in it, front and back. Setting in the dark outside the back door, I seen them Hempsons jerk open the front door, and erupt into the kitchen, red eyed with drink, and tangled-haired and looking even ornier than the Lord had made them.

“Come out and get it!” they howled. “No use to hide. Come out and take your medicine, you—” Well, if I had been half what they said I was, human society would have poisoned me in self-defense before I was six

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years old. They looked round the kitchen and then stomped and jingled into the setting-room. I hugged myself like a twin brother.

"The white-livered whelp has crawled under the bed somewheres," brayed the old man. "Strike a match! Here's one of his dam' cats. Take that!"

Ay, Chihauhua, mi tierra! Ay, mi madre! Oh, my suds! Did anything happen? Don't subpoena me on the case, for I couldn't see nothing. I just heard them three Hempsons blow up all at once, like one of these Fourth of July things that bust all of a sudden and spits up a big shower of colored fire. They sure did express their sinful minds. What they had said in the kitchen would sound like the secretary's report at a Baptist convention alongside of what they said in the setting-room when the old man had kicked the little widow in the dark. They had met

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the enemy and they were hern. I seen that setting-room door just simply spout Hempsons, and the invisible power streamed out into the open along with them. The front door of the kitchen was too narrow for their state of mind and they come near taking the door frame with them for a souvenir. They seemed horrible anxious about their horses.

I used the very last of my manly strength to raise the old shotgun and fire one barrel at the north star. Then I caved in, a total but glorious wreck, and slid off of my juniper log onto the ground and split the kittens, and laid there and cried and choked and snuffled and whimpered and snorted, while I heard them valiant Hempsons fanning it up the draw—clickety, clickety, clickety—faster than they had come down.

Well, the old man—my old man, that I worked for—lent me a tent to sleep in for a couple of weeks. And when I told him

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about the Hempson invasion he grewed ten years younger in five minutes. He paid for sixteen dollars' worth of paint and calcimine to do my house over on the inside, and when I got through, there wasn't a fancier house this side of Los Angeles.

And did I ever shoot the widow? No, Senor; I most onquestionably never did. I respected and admired that widow and felt towards her like a brother. She raised her family under my kitchen floor and they growed up the pride and joy of their mother's heart and went their ways out into the great world, all onmolested by me. I never heard them rustling round under the floor boards of a night but what I grinned with tender memories. No, Senorita; I never bothered the widow again, nor she me, for skunks are a heap better than their general reputation and I'm here to tell the world that their home life is pure, so long as it is ondisturbed by hostile outside influences.

II

IN THE NATURAL

Lots of folks bow up their necks and paw the dirt because the Mexicans don't love us, but in all the dickerings I've seen between them and us, I couldn't see that they had any special reason to. I believe that any two-legged man is as good as I am, at least until he has had a good, square chance to prove that he aint. I don't believe in running it over no man simply because he has a skin the color of a water olla and don't happen to know the American language nor much of anything else.

It was them democratic principles of mine that made me do the way I done with the three Mexican families that come down like a wolf on the fold and camped at the Buckshot springs with a big band of Angora goats. I was baching at the east ranch and the Buckshot country was in my range.

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Goats spoil range, and I was responsible to the old man for the safety of the grass in that neighborhood, so it put me in a delicate position. I just naturally had to get shut of them goats.

Al Stidder, over the mountains, had a case just like it. His method was that every time he caught a string of goats strayed from the main band, he roped one and drug it to death. Then he would go to the Mexicans in charge and habla. "One of your goats has had a bad accident," he would say in Spanish. "You will find him laying in such-and-such a place." Al drug five goats to death in three days, always notifying the herders of the sad event in the same polite way, and then the goats evaporated from that part of the country.

Now, while I aint got a scrap of prejudice against no kind of men, I just naturally don't take to goats; yet I'm enough of a

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democrat to give even a goat a fair shake. I milled the subject round in my mind and reckoned I would try kindness and reason in that goat matter before I sprung anything savage.

I went to that goat camp at the Buckshot springs and gathered the Mexicans round me like children round their mother's knee. I admonished them in all the Mexican language I had, mixed up with some American, and enough gestures to outfit a revival preacher. I explained that their goats were ruining the range for my company's cattle, and that the onery things even shoved under the barbed wire and chawed the life out of my horse pasture. I argued that their goats could do just as well up in the mountains, where the cattle didn't go much. Intonces, would they please pick up their goats and move? Comprende, amigos? They done it beautifully. Si, Senor Spike, cierto. They

IN THE NATURAL

comprendied perfectamente and would move their goats inmediateamente, as soon as they could pull up stakes—say pasada manana. Pasada manana would do, and I didn't exactly kiss them goodbye but we parted very friendly.

Pasada manana went by and the week went by and, circulating round in the Buckshot country one day, I seen that goat outfit still in the same place. It ruffled up my neck feathers some and I rode into that camp pretty sudden. They must have done business with my noble fellow-countrymen before, for when they seen me coming the women herded the kids into the tents as if a thunderstorm was about to bust. It didn't. I wasn't as sweet as before but I was perfectly cool and onpassionate in my hablando. The men-folks sputtered and poured out excuses as a cement mixer pours out mud. Si, Senor Spike, si, si, but two of the ninos

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had been very sick and the madres were very much worried, with no medico within twenty miles, and a caballo had strayed off, and so on. But the ninos were now mucho better and the caballo was fetched back and—si, senor, they would drag it pronto, inmediatamente, as soon as they could pull up stakes, say pasada manana. Pasada manana would have to do again, but I done my best to look as stern and lofty as a American eagle as I rode away.

Next few days I was most too busy to roll a smoke. The old man sent Tuck Williams and me over across the pass to fetch a bunch of stuff he had bought. There were fifty of them and they were pretty salty, being mountain cattle that had hardly seen two men before in their born days, and it used up some time and all our patience to shove them as far as my ranch. We had orders to change the brand on them before drifting

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them further and, not having no chute at the east ranch, we had to rope and throw every one. Between cooking our meals and tending the branding fire and flopping them animals and dodging their horns and tailing them down and wrastling them round generally, we had a busy day. And it was a hundred and five in the shade on the porch.

About three o'clock Tuck wanted to let up and take a couple of guns and ride over to the Buckshot springs and see if that Mexican goat outfit had left. If they hadn't, he wanted to run them off in the good old-fashioned white man's way, for Tuck was a uncivilized sort of a bobcat in them days, even if he is the best friend I've got. I wouldn't stand for it. Them Mexicans were my experiment in liberty, equality and eternity and I wasn't going to have no rough-neck infringe on them with a sixshooter. So we finished the branding and Tuck went off

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to the home ranch, and from there to town, where he was taking a girl to a dance that night. For once I was glad that nobody loved me and that I hadn't no social standing, for I wanted to take my own time and accumulate a good, soaking, sizzling, soul-satisfying bath for myself. I met up with a man once that bragged he hadn't taken a bath for eighteen years, and I looked at him and believed him from the bottom of my heart, but I aint that sort. So, after I had cooked and et my supper and washed the dishes, I drug the washtub out in the middle of the floor and ondressed and had a good time with myself for a half-hour.

I had just got through rubbing myself down and stepped out on the porch to have a smoke before I dressed myself, when I happened to think of the cattle. I had aimed to open the corral gate and throw them in the pasture before supper, but forgot. Be-

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sides being wild, they were all sore from their brands now, and hungry, so they were most onusually on the prod, and the sounds that come over from the corral made me nervous. "Brrrk!" says one of them in steer swear-language, and then there was a drumming and scuffling of split hoofs and I could hear the corral fence skreak under the pressure. That wouldn't do. I knowed that fence was awful weak in one or two places, and I didn't want that bunch to bust out and scater themselves all over the Gadsden Purchase before morning.

I kicked my feet into an old pair of cowhide zapatas that I used for slippers, without going through no more formalities in the way of dressing, and galloped across to the corrals in the moonlight. I opened the gate and let the cattle scuffle through into the pasture, and shut the gate and turned round to go back to the house—and then I stopped.

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It was a hot June night with a full moon and just a breath of warm wind, and right then it come to me that I was actually feeling a breeze for the first time in my life. It aint enough to feel one on your face; your face is weathered and tough. Why, that breeze touched me, up and down and round, as soft as a brush of ostrich plumes, and I never had no idea that a man could get so much fun out of his own skin. I raised up on my toes and stretched my arms and tried a yell. It went fine. I know now why civilized Americans aint really free. No man is free that wears clothes. But I was free then—alone in the warm moonlight and five miles from the nearest ranch, and the night was mine, and the breeze was mine, and that amazing, delicious hide was mine. Ee-e-ow!

I seen old Whitey over in the corral, where I had kept him up to wrangle on in the morning, and he give me another idea. I waltzed

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over, jerked an old hackamore off a post, slipped it on Whitey's nose and hopped on him without no saddle. He was gentle and easy gaited and, besides, it suited my notion to ride like a old-time Indian that night. For a ways we loped down the road and I yelled; then we walked a spell and I sung, and—ay, mi madre! that moon! and—ay, mi vida! that warm, dainty breeze!

Pretty soon, while I was reaching for a high note in a song, I noticed that the moonlight in front of me got scrambled with some other kind of light, and I screwed my head around and looked straight into the lamps of a automobile. I don't know what the people in that car thought. I hope they were the kind of people that don't think at all. I dug my heels into old Whitey and we swung off and drifted up a draw right lively and we didn't go back on the road that night. A road is a poor, tame, civilized kind of a thing, anyway.

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Over the hill I come upon something that was more to my notion. Down in a white sandwash I seen two coyotes. One sat on his tail and pointed his nose at the moon and sent up howls that were just as long as his lungs would permit, and the other hopped and skipped round him, giving off little short yelps. Only two of them, but they sounded like a dozen. They were uncivilized and happy, just like me. I don't often feel brotherly towards a coyote, but that night I swung Whitey away and we left them warblers practising their music.

A half-hour after that I found myself in the Buckshot country, and it come to me that I might as well mix business with pleasure by sneaking up on the hill above the springs and making sure that them goat-herding invaders had evacuated, so we dropped into a little draw and jogged towards the springs. I had got near enough

IN THE NATURAL

so I was looking for a likely gap in the brush by the trail, to whip up on the hill, when the calamity come. It was nothing but a stray goat that jumped up in the brush by the trail and scared Whitey. Being a cow horse, Whitey hadn't never associated with goats, and there aint no accounting for a horse's nerves, anyway.

"Snort!" says the goat, and hopped up about four feet from us. "Snort!" says Whitey, and then he quit the country so sudden I had to grab six ways to keep from going off over his tail. Straight down the draw we blowed. I tried to stop him but I hadn't no stirrups to throw my heft into, and that old hackamore might as well have been a cobweb. Whitey was personally conducting the trip, and I hadn't no say. I prayed that we wouldn't meet nobody until he got tired but my prayers didn't get very high, for at the next turn in the draw I seen

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a matter of seconds. I know that one of the men didn't even take time to go round a fire. He went right through it and knocked down the pot rack and dumped a mess of frijoles into the ashes. A senora surged into a row of tent ropes and throwed herself, and I took notice of that tent caving in like London bridges falling down. The pain-fullest second of all was when Whitey jumped clean over a two-year-old nino and come near spilling me off, which give me a nervous chill, partly on the nino's account but more on my own. I had important business with them Mexicans, but I wasn't ready to transact it just then.

After a age or so we were out in the still moonlight again, and my lungs filled and my cheeks begun to cool off. I sawed the hackamore rope round until I got Whitey pointed towards home and then I let him go. It wasn't long, at his speed, before we got

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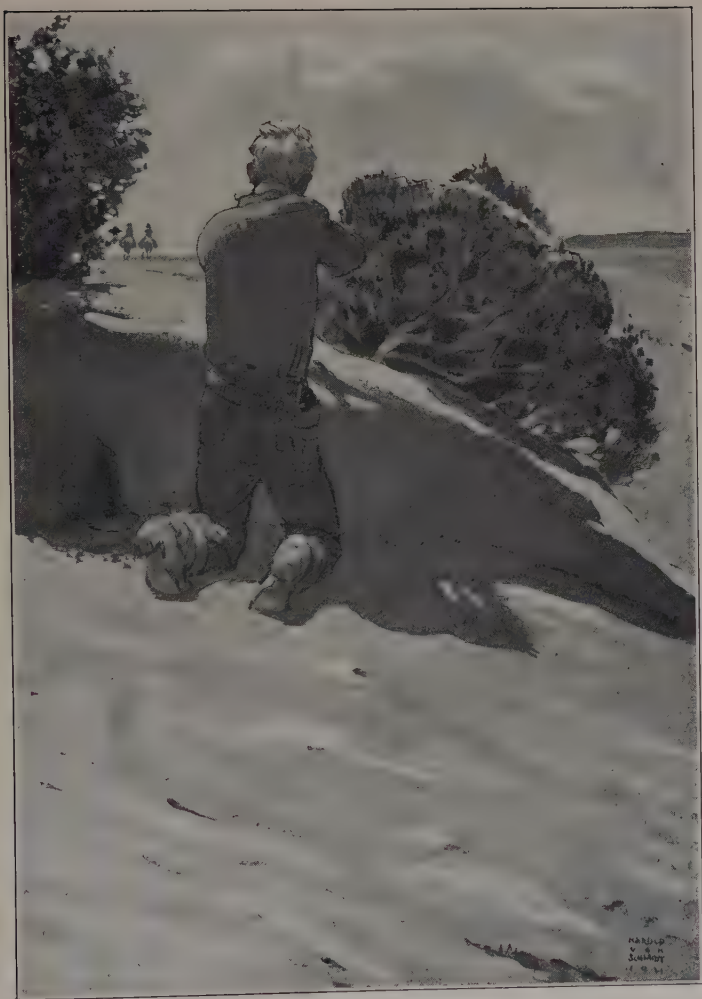
there, and then the first thing I done was to dive into the house and put on a whole armful of clothes, though it was bedtime.

I was up at daylight next morning and wrangled me a horse and started over to deliver a ultimatum to that Mexican outfit. I didn't ride Whitey, though—a horse of his color is too easy identified. But when I rode to the springs I seen nothing but a few loose scraps of paper blowing round the ashes of the fires. Looking up towards the mountains, I seen a queer white patch that sort of flowed along the side of a hill two miles away, and I knowed it was goats. That was enough, and I sifted back to be at the ranch before Tuck come.

I never told nobody about that happy, on-lucky night for a long time—not even Tuck—but the next Sunday I was in town I got to chinning with Joaquin Rivas, that knows all the Mexicans in the country, and he told

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me a wonderful story. He said that one night the week before, when some perfectly sober and reliable acquaintances of his had been camped at the Buckshot springs, the angel Gabriel on a great white horse had swooped down on them out of the moonlight like a bullet hawk and gone through their camp like lightning. None of them had suffered more than the scare, they said, because the good-hearted angel had kept his arm throwed across his face, so he wouldn't kill them with the light of his countenance. Joaquin had some doubts about the story, but he said it was a fact that the whole outfit had come to town and gone to confession for the first time in years, so something unusual must have happened. So, though I've got some mean things to answer for in my life, they may be offset some by the fact that one time I called a large bunch of sinners to repentance.



"Tuck wanted to run them off in the old fashioned white man's way"

III

THE SACRED SALT

Treat a man like a man and he'll act like one. That's one thing everybody says yes to and nobody believes much. The big talkers like to say that all men are brothers, but the way that everybody suspicions everybody else don't speak very well for the family.

One afternoon late in the fall, during my baching days on the east ranch, Al Stidder stopped and left eighty dollars that he owed my boss for a horse, and after he had rode on I was lolling by my setting-room table, fingering the money and wishing it was mine, when somebody opened the kitchen door and said: "Excuse me, please." The voice was so gentle that I expected it was some well-dressed town man with a automobile busted down on the road, but when I turned round and seen what was in the door-

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way I reckon my eyes must have rounded like a white owl's.

Of all the sorry road-runners that ever set foot inside of my hospitable 'dobe walls, this was the sorriest. He was as tall and thin as a yucca spike, and weathered and worn and windwhipped and sun-beat like a Old Glory that has flopped in the breeze for thirteen month. I guessed right off that he had some Indian blood, by the straightness of his back and the look of the long dusty black hair that dropped clear down on his shoulders, though he was white man enough to have a beard that was wilder than the hair. He had on a ragged cotton shirt that showed a good deal of sunburnt chest, in spite of it being cold weather, and his coat was a swallowtail that had started out to be black but had give up and settled down to a sickly, discouraged-looking green. His overalls had faded cheerfuller, to a sort of

THE SACRED SALT

a sky blue in the cleaner places, and a tear in one knee was stitched together with mesquit thorns. His shoes took first money, though. They were a pair of old rubber boots with the legs cut off, and he had slit deep wedges down each instep and then laced the edges together with twine string so the things would stay on his feet.

"Excuse me, please," says this scarecrow, shuffling in and shutting the door. "I want to ask a favor."

"Shoot," says I, not having the breath to say more.

"I want you to let me sleep on the floor alongside of your cookstove tonight," says this sorry hobgoblin. "It's awful cold to sleep on the bare ground by a fire these nights. If you'll just let me stay I'll go out in the brush and pick up enough sticks before dark to keep me warm, so it won't use up your firewood."

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I couldn't do nothing but stare at him for a minute and he seemed to think I was about to throw him out, for he drewed himself up, trying to look proud and independent, and says: "I don't want nothing to eat to-night. I had some lunch over at the Three C ranch this afternoon. I aint hungry, a bit."

The 'Three C was eight miles across the pass, and this pitiful rag doll was so ga'nt that his old swallowtail coat looked as if it hung over the back of a chair. I aint specially soft hearted but when my heart does take a soft spell it goes like butter in a hot skillet.

"You come in here with me!" says I, getting up and going into my bedroom. I pawed over a box of old clothes in the corner and dug out a flannel shirt that was too small for me in the neck, and a pair of corduroy pants, and tossed them on the bed.

"Now you crawl into that shirt and them

THE SACRED SALT

pants," says I. "I'm going out and get supper for the both of us, and if you don't prove yourself a liar by eating more than I do, I'll make you eat them gum shoes of yours for dessert."

Pretty soon he come out in his new clothes, smiling a mild smile that looked as out of place among his fierce black whiskers as a baby-blue ribbon around a grizzly bear's neck.

"I put 'em on right over my other shirt and pants," he says, "so now I got a suit of underclothes. I aint had no underclothes for a long time, and they're hard to go without when you travel this time of year."

He asked if he could help me any, and when I said no he dropped into a chair and watched me getting supper, his eyes following me from table to stove and back again, just like a dog after he's been out hunting all day without no dinner. He seemed too

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weak to talk, and I was so sorry for him that every time I looked at him I opened a new can of something. Pretty soon I got on everything that the table would hold and we hauled up our chairs. He proved himself a liar, all right. I never seen a man eat further nor faster in the same time. He cleaned things up so swift that I reined in my appetite and got my fill just watching him go to it. Finally he run his knife around the edge of his plate for the last time and pulled out a deadly-looking black cob pipe, while I pushed a sack of tobacco across the table to him.

"Say!" he purred. "Say! this is the biggest eat I've had since I started."

"Where'd you start from?" I asked.

"Los Angeles," he answered, after he got his old pipe to making poison gas. "I got a uncle in New Mexico and I aim to look him up. I been on the way near two months. I don't seem to travel fast, some way."

THE SACRED SALT

"Your shoes aint exactly a racing model," says I.

"No; they aint," he agreed in his mild way. "I been kind of hard up. I had lots of trouble in Los Angeles. A man there done me out of some money. I tried to knife him. They kept me in jail two weeks to see if he was going to die, and then they kept me six months more for something or other."

He stopped to take that onholy pipe out of his mouth, looking across at me with them queer, oncertain, brown eyes of his, and went on, speaking as gentle as a girl child.

"That man," he says, "that man he done me out of thirty-seven dollars. Wouldn't you knife a man like that?"

"Well, I don't know," I answered real thoughtful. "I don't reckon I'd undertake to stab anybody for less than fifty, but that's a matter of taste and fancy."

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Inside I was thinking: "Oh, holy hospitality! Oh, lovely human nature! Here's a fellow man for your heart—a half-breed, a stabber, a jailbird, and a little crazy besides! Am I going to lose my religion tonight, or just my life?"

But we had a right gay evening of it for all that. After we had talked about a good many things I got out my old guitar and thumped on it like I often done of evenings, and while I was whistling something lively my company got up and started a sort of a war dance. If you ever seen a solemn-looking man with whiskers and a long-tailed coat dancing in a pair of rubber shoes four sizes too big for him, it aint no use to tell you how much fun I was having. Most of the time I couldn't pucker my mouth to whistle, and had to keep him going with the guitar and my foot on the floor. About that time, while we were in the middle of

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"Turkey in the Straw," the kitchen door opened and Tuck Williams walked in.

My fellow-man stopped dancing as if he had been shot, and I laid the flat of my hand on the strings. Tuck was my old side-kick at the home ranch but I hadn't seen him for a month, and as he walked in I noticed that he was dressed better than usual and had a kind of majestic look to him.

"What's the chances for a bed?" he asked, giving a hard look at my company.

"Couldn't be better," says I. "This gentleman is going to stay all night but there's still worlds of room. Where have you been all this time?"

"Oh, here and there; down across the line and back again—lots of places." And he sat down in a corner and rolled a smoke and blowed out a cloud, shooting sideways glances at my Los Angeles friend just the

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way my biggest cat used to look at the hens when they come up round the kitchen door and tried to steal the dinner out of the plate under his nose. I could fairly see Tuck lay back his ears.

It was plain that he didn't like the company I was keeping and he was so tight-mouthed and sour that I seen the evening was spoiled. So I reckoned that it was bed-time and went out to the windmill to get a bucket of water, like I generally done before rolling in. It was a still night, so I hung the bucket on the spout and clumb the tower and turned the mill by hand. When I got down again I found Tuck standing on the well platform.

"Say," he braced me, "where did you get that convict in there?"

"What are you calling ongentlemanly names for?" I shot at him. "He may be a bishop or a railroad president."

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"Likely!" he snorted. "It's my business to watch all scum of his kind from now on. I've been a deputy sheriff for three weeks. Day before yesterday I took two prisoners over to the pen, and I'm on a man hunt to-night. When did this thing come to your house?"

"Tonight," I answered.

"Did you feed him?"

"Sure; to the brim."

"Where does he sleep?"

"Well," says I, "I don't just hanker to put him in any of my bedclothes, but I reckon I can make him snug in the saddle room with gunny sacks and old blankets."

"Spike Saddler," growed Tuck, "the next time I see the judge I'm going to have a guardian appointed for you. Listen. Night before last a better looking bum than this asked to stay over night at a ranch down on the San Pedro. They run him off. In the

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night he come back and smashed the float valve on the water trough so everything run out of the tank, and stole all the chickens he could carry off from the hen house. If the house hadn't been locked he'd have murdered the outfit. I'm after him now."

"Yes," argued I, "but the point is that they run him off. Served them right for treating a hungry man that way. Treat a man white and he'll act white. That's my religion, Tuck, and it's different from some religions, for it works. I read somewhere that among the Ayrabs no man could possibly do another man dirt if he had once set in his house and et his bread and salt. I'm introducing the idea into Arizona and it has worked fine in this climate so far."

"Bread and salt! Oh, you and your theories!" snorted Tuck. "It's lucky I'm here to protect you tonight, you sweet innocent. I sized this ga'nt coyote up, and he's got a

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mean eye. He'd murder his grandmother for two bits. Lets get back to the house, or all the Ayrabs and all their camels couldn't keep him from picking the place over and filling the slack of his shirt with your property. Don't let him guess I'm a officer. I want him to feel free and act natural."

It's a wicked thing to plant suspicions in a man's chest. The minute Tuck spoke of going back to the house I thought of that eighty dollars Al Stidder had paid me in the afternoon laying among some papers on the setting-room table all this time. It seemed low down to think mean of my gum-shoed friend after the fine evening I'd had with him, but that money was the old man's, not mine, and the notion of losing it give me a gone feeling in spite of my religion. I glanced at the table after we got into the house, and felt goner yet. The money wasn't

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in sight. I bedded old Gum Shoes down in the saddle room and said good night as friendly as I could manage under the circumstances, and then come back to the setting-room and turned over all the papers on the table to make sure. Nothing doing. It wasn't there.

My first notion was to tell Tuck, him being a deputy sheriff, but I stopped the words before they got out of my mouth. I remembered what I had said to him about my religion not ten minutes before, and it made me red all over to think how he would holler his head off about it everywhere in the county if he found out. No; I couldn't stir up and sick that dog of the law. I just schemed that I would lay awake till Tuck dropped off, and then I would get up and go in the saddle room and have a private settlement with my fellow-man in the dark. He'd hardly pull that knife of his, knowing

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there was another man in the house, and everything would be kept modest and comfortable.

When we were undressing Tuck on-buckled a shoulder holster from under his arm, with a sixshooter in it that had a barrel about a foot long.

"What's that thing for?" I asked.

"That's the kind of 'bread and salt' I carry for such rag-tag as your friend in the saddle room," said Tuck. "It keeps them honester than kindness ever could."

I winced as if I had run a mesquit thorn in my leg, and picked up the gun, an old thirty-two on a forty-five frame that Tuck had borrowed from the sheriff's office. I spun the cylinder like a man generally does when he takes a revolver in his hands. Then I spun it again and looked closer.

"Tuck," said I, "with these old Colts it's safer to leave one chamber empty—the one under the hammer."

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“Mebbe it is with old ladies like you,” he sniffs back at me, “but it’s safe enough that way when a man handles it. When I got to use that gun I want all six shots in my hand.”

We went to bed. I didn’t feel like conversation. My soul was sour because my religion had fell down on me and my fellow-man had done me dirt. I wanted to homestead on a Robinson Crusoe island somewhere and cut out all mankind. I didn’t want to listen to Tuck’s long stories about the people in the jail. I knowed enough about fallen humanity already—that gay deceiver with the tangled whiskers out in the saddle room, for instance. Likewise I had lost all faith in the Ayrabs, even if they did invent the Ten Commandments.

But Tuck laid there and kept right on talking at the back of my head, and bragging about how he was going to clean up all the

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miscreants in the county. I tried to keep awake but it was just too plumb wearisome, and the first thing I knowed I didn't know nothing. When I woke up again I done it with a heavy jolt. It was gray daylight and there was a smell of powder smoke and my ears were ringing. Besides that, somebody was doing a dance round the room in bare feet, and something was spattering. I raised on one elbow and made out that the dancer was Tuck, hopping round on one foot.

"Get up!" he roared. "Get up and help me! I'm shot."

"Who done it?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"Who done it?" he snarls between his teeth. "I done it! Who else would dare? Get up, you bonehead, before I bleed to death."

When I had jumped out and lit the lamp Tuck was still hopping round in a circle and

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the floor looked like a old-time Indian massacre. I didn't add to his pain by asking how it happened. It was too easy to need explanations. After he had handed me that oncalled-for insult about loaded guns the night before, he left his half-growed cannon among some clothes on a chair. When he got up in the morning and begun to paw at his clothes, the gun fell on the floor and naturally and beautifully shot him through the leg, just like I warned him it might.

By the time I got him down in a chair and was giving him first aid with his own necktie, my Los Angeles faith-wrecker showed up from the saddle room, gentler and milder than ever, and stuck his on-blessed black whiskers into the door and asked if there was anything he could do to help. I had good reasons for wanting to keep him in sight till I could tend to a certain piece of business with him, but Tuck

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had to be got to a doctor pronto, so I sent the ongrateful ragmuffin out in the pasture to wrangle the horses while I tore up a clean cotton shirt and went to work on the casualties.

It wasn't really so bad. If that soft-nosed bullet had met up with a bone it would have took his leg off, but it didn't, and within a quarter of an hour we were slashing down the road to town, with Tuck looking quite natural on the seat beside me and the gumshoed villian standing in the wagon box behind us, with his hair blowing out in the wind like a pirate flag.

Our twelve miles to town that morning were as brief as horseflesh could make them and Tuck was still straight up, though some white, when I pulled up at the doctor's office. Doc Burchard was a good fellow and joshed Tuck about his new system of ventilation and said he would fix him up all right and

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then take him home in his car, so I excused myself. I had a sad duty to perform outside. I half expected that my hairy hombre would be a mile across the range by the time I got out in the street, but no; there he was leaning against a china tree and filling his paralyzing pipe out of the sack of tobacco I had give him the night before. He looked at me and smiled. If he had been a cat he would of rubbed against my leg and purred.

"I got something to say to you before I go, Mister Spike," he begun.

"I kind of reckon you have," said I, looking straight through his eyes and out back of his head.

"You're a easy-going man," he went on, "and mebbe sometimes you trust people too much, like this man Tuck. I know men pretty well and most of them aint to be trusted. That man in Los Angeles, he done

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me out of thirty-seven dollars. And this man Tuck, when he come in last night I sized him up and took notice that he had a mean eye. He looked something like that man in Los Angeles, and a man with a face like that would knife his grandfather for two bits. You had a lot of money laying there on the table in plain sight. When you went out after the bucket of water that man Tuck looked hard at me, wishing I would go too, and he kept switching his eyes round the room so I was scared he would notice the money. You had treated me awful white, Mister Spike, and I was glad I was there to protect you. I went to the table and throwed one leg over the corner of it, so as to hide the money, and let on to be looking at a magazine. Then when Tuck went out, I opened the drawer of the table and dropped the money in. It's there now. Had you missed it?"

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I took off my hat and fanned myself. It was a December morning but that didn't make no difference. The trouble was that I wanted to believe in this rubber-shoed riddle. I just naturally hankered and honed to believe in him, for if he was a liar my religion and my faith in my fellow-man would be crippled forever, and I'd never want to hand out the salt of hospitality again, except to horses and cattle and suchlike honest beasts in the corral. I wanted to believe him, but why hadn't he pulled me to one side and told me this before we left the ranch? Was he trying to get a good head start of me by telling this cobwebby lie, which I couldn't prove a lie till I went twelve miles home and looked in that drawer? Hadn't I better throw one arm round his ribs and pin him to the china tree, while I frisked his pockets with the other hand? That's just what would have happened if I had been the smart and

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careful kind, but I was easy-going and I was hobbled with a beautiful, onpractical religion.

“All right, old hand,” says I. “Much obliged to you. Good luck, and here’s something to help you flesh up.” And I left a two-dollar bill in his hand as we shook. He opened his hand and looked at the bill, and then he looked at the sidewalk and at the doctor’s house and at the sky and down the white street and out across the range, and everywhere but at me. He was such a color that it wasn’t possible for him to blush, but his face looked sort of simmering hot. He gulped once or twice and then turned round and shuffled down the path under the china trees as fast as he could and turned the corner.

“Now,” says I to myself, “now, you sentimental calf, you’ve done it! If ever a human man held a fair and onpartial trial on himself

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and found himself guilty in the first degree and published the verdict on his face, this long-haired, butter-voiced, gum-shoed sneak has just pulled off that same operation. There goes your eighty dollars, somewhere in that moving rag-pile. Why don't you go and get it?"

But my deadly religion still had some holt on me, so I just looked after him a minute and then crawled up on the wagon and turned the team out toward the ranch. My body was tired and my soul felt as if it had been pounded, and I hunched over in the seat and let the team take their own time, so it was noon by the time I drove up to the ranch.

I took notice that a couple of wagon loads of Mexicans had stopped by the corral to cook their dinner, and at sight of them some life flashed up in me and I jumped down and started over to order them off the place. Then I stopped and says to myself: "Nope;

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they got one chance in a hundred to eat their dinner in peace. I'll give them that chance", and I turned and run up the path to the house. I onlocked the door (it was locked this time) and bulged in and went to the setting-room table and jerked open the drawer. I stood and looked down into that drawer for one long minute. Then I spun round and marched out the door towards the wagon, stepping high and whistling so loud that all the Mexicans in the corral looked up and grinned. I grinned back and waved my hand to them. The Ayrabs were right, after all.

IV

A GREAT INSTITUTION

A family is a awful thing. I suspicioned that for a long time but never dared to put it in just them words till a girl said it for me, a girl I knowed that had had a rukus with her aunt on the ranch, and the old lady had slapped her, and she had hit for town and got a job in the store.

My family never bothered me much. I've always had two brothers and a sister somewhere, but they were all younger than me and I left home young, before mother died and the kids were all scattered out among the kinfolks. John, my brother next to me, wrote me one letter in ten years, and that was about a claim our father had on the Government for a bunch of horses that the Sioux Indians run off in Dakota, in 1878. John was a lawyer in Oregon—the last I heard of him; so he was interested in such

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things. Sometimes I reckon I will find out where my family is and circulate around and visit them. But then I stop and think that mebbe I would be sorry, and I feel right sure that they would, so I ditch the notion.

Every so often I used to come across some young woman with something in her face that made me think it would be a fine thing to turn loose a new family in the world, one with my own personal brand on it. At them times I always tried to meditate, hard, on one night I rode up to Al Stidder's ranch when the windows were open and I could hear what his wife was saying to him. That generally jerked me back into the saddle and I could keep both feet in the stirrups until the next young woman come along, which was never long.

I though there was a sort of an age limit on the thing and that I might get some peace of mind if I lived long enough; but when old

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Dad Pickett went and married a young woman when he was seventy-three I let loose of all hopes and settled down to a lifelong fight. The world seemed so overstocked with them pleasant young women that I was glad when my boss sent me up on the east ranch to bach by myself, but I never got altogether shut of them even there.

One afternoon in the wintertime, when I was riding home from the JO Bar after helping them raise a new windmill tower, I whipped round a bend and had to set old Jerry down sudden to keep him from running into a automobile that stood there. It was a sorry little one-seater, and a woman was wringing the crank in its nose and looking sad and desperate. The woman was alone and a light-built little thing, so I would have tumbled off and offered to help even if she hadn't been young and good-looking, which she most unquestionably was. I took

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hold and wrung the crank while she fussed with the steering wheel. I wrung and wrung, long enough to freeze about seven gallons of ice cream, without getting a snuffle out of the car. I'm mostly a common sort of a coyote, but in them days I was a rare curiosity in one way; I was the only man in the United States that didn't know how to run a automobile. I lifted up the lid and looked at the organs of the thing, but all I could make out was that it was still warm, but quite dead.

Then I owned up to my ignorance and told her the only thing to do was to wait till some other car come along, with a man in it that knowed a gasoline engine from a egg beater; and then, not to leave the poor little soul in the middle of the desert without no company but a deceased flivver, I hung around and talked. She was young, but she had a straight way of looking at you

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that showed she had been somewhere and back in her life, and her clothes were cut plain and soldierlike and she had on a Red Cross badge. I apologized for my nerve and made a guess that she was a nurse. She was, so good a one that she had been shot over across the water to one of them ongodly countries where the people wear sheep hides and never use water for anything but to soak wagon wheels in. She had lasted six months on the job and then been sent back to this country with a sore spot in her lung, and then she had come West with a little money and lots of hope and had bought a second-hand flivver to ride around in and swallow all the healthy air she could.

That was her story, as it come out in small pieces during a hour of talk. I never seen a girl I took to so, not in a sentimental way exactly, but more like I would take to a straight, fine young boy. Yet I don't know,

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either. Her foreign experience had sure been a tough one and the cool, quiet way she spoke of it would have come well from a boy, but from a girl, and one of her build and weight, it was plumb dazzling. Mebbe I liked her as a girl, after all. And I had a foggy notion that I had seen her, or somebody like her, before somewhere. She didn't seem strange more than two minutes. And I don't want to seem a conceited old gobbler, but I could see that she liked me, for all her cool, quiet way, and our acquaintance picked up and traveled like an antelope on a open flat.

After while the clouds grewed darker and dipped down and cut the tops off of the mountains, and then come a steady, cold drizzle with a shivery wind behind it, for it was February. I had forgot that the little nurse had such a thing as health to think of till she coughed a cough that was about

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seven feet deep. Then I seen that the one way out for her was to go to my house with me—only about a mile—and wait there till a car come along; and after stalling and stuttering like a boy speaking a piece at school, I sprung it on her. Such a proposition from a roughneck with four days' whiskers on his face would have scared most girls, but I reckon her foreign service had used up all her stock of scare, for she just looked me in the eye for a minute with that straight, clear way of hers, and thanked me and reckoned it would be the best thing to do.

I put my slicker on her. She couldn't have walked in it but old Jerry was gentle. I had some doubts about what he would think of skirts, which I didn't mention, but I got her sidesaddled on him without no accidents, and then struck out for the ranch, drilling along beside him. She said I was a good walker and I come back with the an-

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swer that I worked out long ago and always use when my walking is mentioned—that if my head was only as good as my legs I would be President of the United States. It sounds smart when anybody hears it for the first time, and she laughed. It is disgraceful how a man likes to talk to a girl about himself, and I went on to say that it is my fishpole style of architecture that give me the nickname of Spike, that all the country knowed me by. Then I explained that my real name was Theophilus, which was too long for any day but Sunday, though my last name, Saddler, fit fine, for I was a saddler by nature as well as by name. I had to talk foolish for her sake, for that raw air didn't help her breathing none and it was along about then that she went off into a fit of coughing that left the tears running down her cheeks. The poor little thing looked at me so hard and so pitiful, with the cool,

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nervy look gone from her eyes for the first time, that I hankered to pat her on the back and tell her not to mind. Under the crust of her training she was still a girl.

Pretty soon she got her breath and smiled, though, and told me to go on, and that I was the most original man she had met up with for a long time, and must have an interesting life and interesting folks.

That pleased me so much that, if I had been a dog, I would of wagged my tail and yelped and jumped at old Jerry's nose. I romped in and give her my history—how I was born in the Black Hills in the early days, and how my father was part preacher and part prospector and done considerable trading in horses and cattle to pay the expenses of his other two trades, and how he trailed his family all over the West, and how he learned me to play poker when I was about five because, he said, he knowed I was pre-

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destinated to learn it anyway, in that state of society, and it was his firm conviction that if a man done anything he should do it well. She asked me where my family was, and I told her the little I knowed and the whole lot I didn't know, and ended up with the words of the girl in town—that “a family is a awful thing”. She laughed and said that she thought it was a “awful thing” for brothers to treat each other so.

I seen she was getting cheerfuller all the time, so I prattled on about myself, about old Dad Pickett and his twenty-year-old wife, about the country and what I knowed of Mexico and Cuba, forgetting that she had seen more foreign countries than I had ever dreamed about. And so we made the house about the time the early dark was coming down.

I took her into the kitchen and lit the lamp and built the fire and went to work get-

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ting supper, keeping one eye out the window on the road, for on a drizzly night you can see the glare of a car about five miles away. There was a pot of frijoles con chili on the stove all done; and I washed my hands and rolled up my sleeves and patted out a batch of biscuits, and cut them and panned them and kicked them into the oven, talking all the time. Being cool weather, I had a quarter of beef hung up, so I hacked off a steak about two inches thick, because I had always heard that steaks are good for lungs, and when I had it hollering in the skillet I rested a minute and looked at my company.

It come to me then that there was something queer about her in the last half-hour. She wasn't the same little nurse I had found on the road. It was a funny fix for a girl, alone with a strange man in a strange house, stuck out in the middle of a strange, lonesome country on a stormy night. I had al-

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lowed for that and tried to make her feel easy and safe, but I had succeeded so well that it made me feel oncomfortable.

She was perfectly at home now, and I was strange and stiff and rattled. She had lifted off her cap and hung it by the fire to dry and she went to work clinking around among my chipped dishes and setting the table, and even asked for a tablecloth. Then when the table was all ready—woman-fashion—she set down and waited for supper to get done, talking and laughing as easy as if she had been born there. Of course, on her job she must have met up with all kinds of men and learned to pick the different kinds on sight, and got over the scare of all men that a young, onexperienced girl would have, and yet—

When I found her on the road her eyes glinted cheery, but frosty, like the winter stars. Now they were sort of warm and

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mellow, like a August moon, and they followed every move I made round the kitchen in a way that more than once made me forget what I was doing. A ugly notion begun to make itself heard among my thoughts, like a rattlesnake beginning to sizzle his tail in the middle of a flower bed. I looked at her face, straight-cut and clean and clear, and I believed in her; and then I took notice of the feelings that were flashing over it like lightning across the sky on a hot night, and of the queer fire in her eyes, and I didn't know.

A botany professor from the university stayed with me two weeks one summer, poking round the range for new weeds during the day and setting on the porch with me at night, while we swapped notions about everything in the world, from tobacco to temptation. He said I was a trifle idealistic in the matter of women and I reckon he

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was right, whatever he meant, for he was right in most things.

I know men and I like them, but I don't never expect too much of them. When a man falls down I am sorry, but I hump my shoulders and spread my hands like a Mexican and say, "Well—" and jog on. But when a woman drops below my notion of her it makes me sort of sick, gives me nothing to tie to, leaves me with a what's-the-use fever that makes me want to turn loose all holts and go to the hot place on the high lope. A man has got to believe in something besides a God that sets above the stars.

So, with that little woman's warm eyes on me, I felt as oncomfortable as if I had seven nails sticking up in each boot heel. I jerked the biscuits out of the oven and dumped them on the table, and then I flopped the steak out of the skillet into a plate and spooned some flour into the hot

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grease to make gravy. After it had browned I poured in water and condemned milk, and while I waited for that to come to a boil I stood my heft on one leg and tried to unravel my state of mind, half listening to what my company was saying but not wanting to look at her. Old Blue, being hungry, come up and rubbed against my legs and meowed. For want of something else to do, I picked her up and scratched her under her chin the way she liked, while she purred and dug her claws through my flannel shirt in the painful, loving way that cats have.

Then it come all at once that the little nurse was out of her chair and standing in front of me—close—and her hands were on my shoulders. Her face was twisting as if old Blue was digging her instead of me, and her eyes just blazed up at me.

“Can’t you guess my name?” she says.
“Oh, guess it!”

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That might have made a real human being do some thinking, but not me. I'm slower than a sand turtle in reaching a conclusion, and when I get hold of one I hang on too long sometimes. I turned sort of sick and onery and thought: "What's the use, in a world like this?" Then I raised my head and looked at her. It showed in my face—what I was thinking. Women are smart in that way, and she turned red and winced as if I had hit her across the face with a quirt.

"Oh, Theo!" she choked. "Oh, Theo! Don't!

Theo! Lord help me! How queer that sounded!

Then she stepped back and stood with her chin high and her hands down beside her, like a soldier. "Oh, look at me!" she said in a desperate kind of a way. "Look at me! Don't you remember the little girl that used

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to ride on the wagon seat between the folks? Look at me! Look hard! They used to say I was like mother. Look!"

I done it. At least I tried to look at her, but all of a sudden I swallowed something hard and shut my eyes and couldn't see nothing but yellow speckles. I worked old Blue's claws loose from my shirt and stooped down and put her on the floor as careful as if she had been made of thin glass.

"May God forgive a blind-staggered fool!" I said at last in a wavy voice. "You're my own born sister, Miriam."

Then, to make up for all my slowness, I made one quick move, and Miriam's little army-like shoes didn't touch the floor again till a good five minutes afterward. The gravy boiled away and burned, but we didn't mind. Couldn't neither of us eat much, anyway. After supper I made a fire in the old 'dobe fireplace in the setting-room

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and the two of us stayed right there, holding hands and talking ancient history, dragging out all the goods—and bads—we had both accumulated in sixteen years, and spreading them out for each other to look at.

That evening lasted till half past three the next morning.

Miriam stuck around the east ranch a good deal of the time for the next six months, and she wasn't in my way a bit, even if she did make me scrub the floor according to hospital regulations. And up to now, every time I look out west in the evening and see a new moon, I set down and write a letter to her, like I promised to when she got well and left me. Nine times out of ten a wife is a long chance and, speaking generally and taking both sides of the creek, a family is a awful thing, but I have got an everlasting strangleholt on the idea that a sister is a great institution.

V

DON'T SPOIL HIS AIM!

"It aint no affair of mine," says I to Tuck, "but why on earth, or elsewhere, do you come all the way out here to the ranch and stay over Sunday with me lately?"

"Safety," answered Tuck, pushing back and putting his feet on my supper table and getting ready to smoke. "Your house is a shack and your cooking a scandal and your manners barbarous, but you have got a house without a woman in it and you, with all your faults, don't belong to the sex that is everlastingly trying to kidnap me and marry me."

"One thing I envy you, sweetheart," says I, "and that's your modesty. Which man-eating young woman is after you now?"

Tuck's face was too good-looking for a healthy deputy sheriff's and it sagged in a tired way while he let the smoke drift up



"I believe you're afraid to meet him," she dared back.

DON'T SPOIL HIS AIM!

from his mouth and stared at a pink calendar girl on the wall a minute before he answered:

"They're all after me."

"Why don't you marry one of them and leave her the job of standing off the rest of the bunch?"

"I aint ready to marry yet and I won't be drove."

"Grow whiskers, then. The girls all hate 'em."

"George Washington and Thomas Jefferson fought for liberty without no whiskers, and I reckon I can. I aint no Russian. But it's awful, Spike, no two ways about it. You ought to be thankful."

"Thankful for what?" says I.

"For that face of yours and your onso-ciable disposition," he sighed. "They save you so much trouble. Me, I never have no peace, especially since my uncle died and

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left me that place down on the San Pedro. I never go down street but I catch some girl looking at me like a coyote at a cottontail. Hilda Nelson calls me up at the sheriff's office and talks so long that the old man has named me Cupid. Chiquita Roper's mother lays for me at street corners and everlastingly invites me up to the house of evenings."

"Hilda and Chiquita," meditates I, "daylight and dark, north and south. Some variety, my son."

"But both women," he grunts. "Them two are the worst. The other girls take a shot at me now and then for practice, but Hilda and Chiquita are out to kill. I own I'm a little weak-minded and they're both dangerous. Some moonlight night, when I'm with one or the other of them, I'll throw out some words that I can't decently drag back, and the next thing will be the parson

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and the life sentence, with no time off for good behavior. Last month I rode up to that ranch in the mountains and arrested them three cattle thieves all by my lonesome, but I wasn't near so nervous then as I get over these here lovely birds of prey sometimes. Next week the old man says I got to go over in the Chiricahuas and try to head off Dalzell, but Dalzell is a cinch. He can't no more than shoot me, and that kind of a fight is so simple and open and honest alongside of this being still-hunted by girls—"

Tuck stopped with his mouth still open as we heard feet come up on the porch outside, and somebody rapped at the door.

"Come on in!" I called, and then I stiffened in my chair as I seen Hilda Nelson open the door. I wasn't sorry to see her, though, for such faces as hers didn't often dawn into my black old bachelor kitchen, and the lamp

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seemed to get dim and smoky all of a sudden by comparison. Her long-legged young brother was with her but he didn't matter no more than her shadow on the wall.

"Forgive me, Spike, for breaking into your old woman-hater's den," she laughed, "but Tom and I were coming back from Gleeson in the car and I wanted to see you. I—"

Her words give out for a second as her eyes swung round and lit on Tuck. The red flashed up and died down again on her white skin in a way that was good to look at, and after that I wasn't nothing but a innocent bystander in the conversation.

"So this is where you are, Tuck Williams!" she scolded. "I phoned all over town this afternoon for you. I called up the office but the sheriff said you had gone to Mexico and taken seven thousand dollars of the county money with you—such an old joker!—and that was all I could get out of him.

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And here you are, hiding out like one of your pet criminals."

Tuck scrooched round in his chair and looked half miserable, but not more than half.

"Well," he grinned, "what crime have I been and done now that you are trailing me so hard?"

"Nothing. You're a real nice boy and haven't done anything, but I want you to do something. It's a picnic at the Buckshot springs tomorrow. We'll have about a dozen people and you are one of them. You, Spike, are to come too, and you're to keep Chiquita Roper company."

"Very good, ma'am," said I, saluting, "Chiquita is all right but I'd a little rather take you."

"Oh, I'm president and general manager," she flashed back. "I can't bother with a man."

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"What about Tuck?"

"Tuck?" she hedged. "Oh, Tuck is our standing army. He'll stand round camp and see that Dalzell doesn't get us."

"'Mhm, I sabe perfectamente. The president is always boss of the standing army, glory be to the Constitution!"

"What do you know about Dalzell?" cut in Tuck.

"Why, the sheriff said he was in this part of the country," said Hilda. "That being the case, it would be kind of you to ride into town with Tom and me tonight and keep him from robbing us on the road."

"Well, no, I reckon not, Hilda," hesitated Tuck. "You aint in danger. Dalzell is famous for always being polite to the ladies. He might turn Tom's pockets inside out, but he'd just lift his hat to you and say it was a pleasant evening."

"I believe you're afraid to meet him." she dared back.

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Tuck, being a professional man-hunter, turned a sort of a box-car red and ruffled up his neck feathers a little.

"I aint, either," he vowed. "Tell me where to meet up with that gentleman and I'll walk clean across the county and give you half the reward. But you won't see him tonight. After sticking up two gold-plated passengers trains and a bank in one week, he aint likely to be bothering with chance cars on the road."

"Oh, very well," she finished, getting up to go. "I might ask Spike to go with us, but he's a grouchy old hermit and I won't risk two turn-downs in the same evening. But I'll forgive you, as I always do," she went on, looking down at Tuck with a dangerous glimmer in her eyes. "We'll be coming this way at about ten in the morning and you two must be prepared to be nice to the ladies for several hours after that. You

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boys don't need to bring anything, except—Tuck, you bring a gun, for Mr. Dalzell.”

Of course we walked out to the car with them, and when they sputtered off down the draw Tuck turned to me and said:

“What do you know about that?”

“It's bad,” said I, “and you're leading the poor girl on.”

“I aint,” he swore. “She don't need to be led. She follows too well.”

“She's too pretty,” reckoned I. “You'll never make your getaway. Put it off as long as you can, though, for I'm broke and I hate to think of a wedding present.”

“Make yourself easy,” soothes Tuck, “but—she is pretty, sure enough. Do you blame me for feeling a little wabby sometimes?”

“If I had your chance,” said I in a sad voice, “I wouldn't stop at wabbling. I'd fall so hard that my teeth would rattle. You have my free pardon in advance for anything reckless you may do.”

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After breakfast in the morning I set to and worked myself over, scrubbing and shaving and climbing into my best clothes and going through all the painful preparations for joy. Tuck didn't have much getting ready to do, being pretty nifty at all times, but I noticed him stowing his weapon away in his pocket, and laughed.

"Nervous?" I prodded.

"Preparedness," he answered. "Hilda didn't know anything about that outlaw but women have queer hunches. Dalzell is probably in this county, and he is a guy full of funny notions. I used to know him before he went bad—worked with him on a horse roundup two years ago and got quite chummy. He knows I'm a deputy now and—here; look at this. It come yesterday."

I took the letter he held out and read: "Dear Tuck: I am going down to Mexico for my health and will come through your coun-

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ty about the first of the week. I will be happy to look you up and borrow your gun. Yours with love, Bronc Dalzell."

"Bluff!" said I. "He won't come within two hundred miles."

"Don't bet too high on that," said Tuck. "Dalzell is the guy that stuck up the sheriff of Zuni County and took his gun away from him and left him all his money. He's a real artist and comes up strong on the fancy touches. I've got a hunch that I'll meet him somewhere this week, and if I do there'll be some Fourth of July before we part."

"Anyway, you must dance before you die," said I, looking out. "Here comes the picnic outfit up the road, three cars of 'em. I'll promise to draw Chiquita's fire all day, so you'll have only Hilda to defend yourself against, dearie."

"That aint kindness, no matter how it's intended," he disagreed. "Let 'em come at

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me in bunches. The more a man's outnumbered in this kind of fighting, the safer he is. Let 'em come at me in bunches."

"Well," said I, hooking a cat out onto the porch with my foot and shutting the door after us, "if the girls admire you half as much as you admire yourself, there's going to be a jingle of breaking hearts on your wedding day like a china store in a earthquake. It's a wonder you don't write poetry to your own eyebrow."

Chiquita was about as different from Hilda as a human could be, except that they were both girls, and both of the sort that it puts wild notions into a man's head to look at. Chiquita's hair was as dark as Hilda's was sunshiny, and her skin was a clear brown, with the red shining through on the cheeks. They said that Chiquita's grandmother was a Navajo, and there was something in her quiet style and the way she kept her foot on

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the neck of her feelings that made me think it was true.

Hilda whistled Tuck to a seat beside her in the first car, where she had the wheel, and there, before all the world, she reached over and straightened his necktie. Chiquita watched the performance and as I got in beside her I caught a look in her eyes that reminded me, some way, of a mountain cat waiting beside the trail for the deer to come down and drink—a hungry look and yet a mighty patient one—and that was Indian too. It only lasted a second and she went on talking to me as pleasant as I could ask, but I could see that Tuck's fancy for himself as a all-round favorite had some foundations. I wasn't surprised. I fell for Tuck years ago when he was riding for the Lazy F outfit, with his chin onrazored and his boot heels run over, so I couldn't blame the girls.

It was a good day for a picnic. The July



"I'm a collector, ladies and gents"

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rains were pretty well on, and the range was green and the air sparkled. Everybody in the crowd was happy on the outside, which is all you can ask of a bunch of humans, and the less you think of the little onpleasantnesses that are going on inside, the better time you'll have at the party. Under the hill by the Buckshot springs we found a little grassy place, ringed with brush and shaded by a big black liveoak, where the women begun to spread out a lot of things that were mighty interesting to me after two years of my own offhand cooking.

Hilda was the boss of the outfit, and took to her job like an old hand. She kept Tuck everlastingly busy, but she was so clever and so gay about it that he didn't look any on-happy in his bondage and there wasn't a man in the bunch that didn't envy him. She was a picture, standing up so bright and slim and straight against the live oaks. She had

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on a waist of this wonderful stuff that stops just at the edge of being nothing at all, and is made to look through instead of at. Mebbe it wasn't polite for me to take notice of how white and pretty her arms and shoulders were, but what do girls wear such things for, then?

The dinner was about ready and the people were beginning to josh about who was to set next to who, when there was a little screech at the edge of the clearing and I glimpsed Hilda, with a face like paper, grab Tuck and snuggle up to him. There wasn't no need to ask what was the matter, for up from the edge of the brush come the noise of that cold, shivery sizzle that nobody ever forgets when he has heard it once. The snake was a goodsized one, and we could see his flat head swaying back and forth above the grass as if he was dancing to his own music. Tuck swung Hilda behind him,

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stepped forward and pushed his gun down as close as was safe, so as to make the snake help in the aiming, as a snake often will when you give him a chance. Hilda didn't understand that part of it, of course.

"Oh, Tuck, don't go so near the thing," she quivers, trying to pull him away. "He'll bite you. Oh, he will!"

But Chiquita, standing quiet among the chirping women, moved out and took hold of her, with her little hand looking brown and strong against Hilda's slim white arm.

"Come back and let him be," she said. "Don't spoil his aim."

The gun popped just then and the snake went down in a wriggling heap. Tuck put one foot on what was left of the head and kneeled down and cut off the rattles.

"He's your snake," he said, holding out the rattles to Hilda. "Want his scalp?"

"Oh, Tuck, no!" said Hilda, shriveling up. "I couldn't touch the horrid things."

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"Give 'em to me, then," said Chiquita. "I'll put them in my collection."

She dropped them into the pocket of a little silk shirt that was smooth and brown and without frills, just like herself. Tuck and I were left alone beside the deceased for a minute as the people drifted back to the spread, and I looked square into his eyes.

"Don't spoil his aim!" repeated I, as solemn as a preacher. "Tuck Williams, there's some wife in a girl that would live up to them words."

"You're a sentimental old maid, Spike Saddler," he answered, "and you don't know much, but sometimes you have a glint of sense. Let's eat."

The dinner was about all I thought of for the next fifteen minutes. I like all the fussy, frilly things that women fix up to eat, and I hate it that I seldom get a chance at them except when I set down at a awful white

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table with about eleven silver forks alongside of my plate, which scares me and takes away my appetite. But nobody ever uses more than one knife and fork at a picnic and I'm right at home next to the ground, so Chiquita didn't get much glittering conversation out of me for a while. I remember that I had got past my first rush of speed and was settling down to a steady gait, with a piece of cake in one hand and a bottle of pop in the other, when somebody said that the cold pop was nearly out, and the next thing I noticed was Chiquita going down the trail through the brush, with a bucketful of bottles to be cooled in the spring. I recollect thinking it was another sign of the Indian streak in her—to carry the bucket herself instead of asking some man to do it for her, but I was pretty busy, so I reckoned I'd just wait and blow her up when she got back.

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"Happy day, ladies and gents. May I bust into your gay little party?"

I was just emptying my bottle of pop, and when I brought my eyes down to see where this strange voice come from, I near choked. A man was slipping out of the brush by the spring trail, and the gun in his hand was pretty much covering all of us. He looked tired and dirty, but his eyes were quick and his face was full of laugh, and from things Tuck had told me, I didn't have no trouble guessing who he was. He was Dalzell.

"Hands high!" he snaps. "Quit it, Tuck Williams, and stick up that hand, or—"

Poor old Tuck! If shame could kill a man quick he would have dropped that minute. He had reached for his gun without thinking, and if he had been alone the hills would have hollered in a second, but there he was in a bunch of trembling women, with Hilda lean-

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ing right against him. It wouldn't do. Breathing short and with sweat showing on his face, he put up his hands as if each of them weighed forty pounds. He was too mad to speak, or I'm afraid the ladies would have heard something. I was holding my cake and my pop bottle high in the air, but I bowed my head and said a few words of sympathy for Tuck under my breath.

"That's better," said Dalzell, as cheerful as a schoolma'am lining up a class. "I won't keep you long. I'm a collector, ladies and gents. That's my hobby. Right now I'm plumb crazy about a collection of firearms, and that's what made me bulge in here all rude and oninvited today. I happen to know that my dear old friend, Deputy Sheriff Williams, has got a rare and lovely shooting iron on him that will just make my collection perfect before I go abroad for my health. If Mr. Williams will get up on his

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hind legs, keeping his hands as near the sky as possible all the time, and come over here to me, I'll relieve him of that there dangerous toy, and then bid you one and all a kind good day."

Poor old Tuck. His teeth were chewing his under lip and he was shaking all over. He was a Texan, with southern ways, and I was afraid the hot, mad tears would roll down his cheeks the next minute and be taken for a sign of scare. He was too painful a thing to look at, so I switched my eyes to where Dalzel stood, smiling and easy, but with his gun lined straight at Tuck's middle and his eyes like needle points. Then I caught a flicker of something under his arm, and Chiquita Roper drifted up the trail with her empty bucket in her hand and stopped a few feet behind him. I could see the pretty red sink out of her cheeks as she took in the picture, but she didn't make a sound.

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She stood undecided for a second, and then she begun to float forward with a motion that reminded me again of a mountain cat.

Tuck seen it all, but he was careful not to show it. He gathered his legs under him and stood up and started towards the outlaw right across the dinner, dragging his feet among the dishes and beginning to talk.

"It aint fair, Dalzell, you roost-robbing coyote! To catch a man in a bunch of women where he don't dare to fight! It's a coward's trick, you petrified pup, and it aint fair."

"Sorry, dear old Tuck," says Dalzell, "but I can't take no risks, for I'm a valuable man. I'm worth a thousand dollars to anybody, even dead."

"I'll get you and that thousand yet," growled Tuck, still going forward very slow and talking to make a noise. "You're polite to women-folks, are you? You better

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be, for you're such a awkward owlhead that some woman will do for you if you don't look out. Yes; that's about your style. A woman could—yes; a woman will get you!"

Tuck raised his voice to a yell on the last words, as little Chiquita, scared but game, swung her bucket up behind Dalzell and clapped it down over his head. The gun went off—wild—and in two seconds all of us men were in the game. Dalzell thrashed round like a bronc with a rope on him for the first time, but we were five to one and he was soon quiet, tied hand and foot and propped against a rock. He was a likeable scamp for all his bad record, and as soon as he could wink the sand out of his eyes he looked up at us and grinned.

"The light of my glory has done gone out," he says, spitting out some gravel. "Who put on the extinguisher?"

"Here she is," said Tuck, catching Chi-

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quita by the arm and leading her up. "Miss Chiquita Roper, this is all that's left of Mr. Bronc Dalzell."

Chiquita blushed and looked down at the outlaw in the friendliest kind of a way.

"I'm sorry the bucket skinned your nose, Mr. Dalzell," she said. "I didn't have time to be careful."

Dalzell stared at her and give a laugh—a thundering good laugh for a man that was loping straight down the last mile of the trail to the penitentiary.

"You've done a whole lot more than skin my nose, Senorita Chiquita," he chuckled, "but I aint holding spite, seeing it's you. If circumstances—and ropes—permitted, I'd like to shake hands. So far as my influence goes, I'll see that you get the reward, for you've sure made one big capture today, young lady."

"She's made two of 'em," put in Tuck all

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of a sudden, looking down at her in a queer, solemn way. "Listen, the whole bunch of you. Life is oncertain and this is the finest woman I'll ever meet up with. Chiquita Roper, in the presence of God and these witnesses I, Tucker Williams, am asking you to marry me. Are you game?"

Tuck always did make up his mind in the way that powder does when fire touches it, but his proposition was a surprise to us all and must have come like a shot of lightning to little Chiquita. She stood staring down at Dalzell in a stunned way for a minute, not that she was in any doubt about the answer, I reckon, but just to get her breath back. Then she raised her head and looked at Tuck steady and straight—a look that was worth ten thousand dollars and made me oncertain whether I wanted most to hug him or kill him.

"I'll do it, Tuck," she said.



"You ongodly polecat," he said in a gentle voice.

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He slipped his arm round her and kissed her like he was doing something religious, as mebbe he was, and then I thought he was going to make a speech to us, but he swallowed once or twice and give it up. He reached down and stuck a cigarette between the outlaw's lips and patted his tousled head.

"Dalzell," he said in a gentle voice, "you ongodly polecat, you're a beautiful man and I love you. It's two months till next term of court, and if in that time there's anything you want—except your liberty—you have the jailer phone me and I'll get it for you."

I was awful sorry for Hilda, though, and when we were ready to start I sidled up to where she was standing beside her car.

"Hilda," says I, "will you do me the large favor to let me ride home with you?"

Hilda's eyes were blue, but right then they weren't a cool blue—more like the blaze of a gasoline torch.

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“Why?” she cut. “Why should any man pay attention to me? I haven’t got any thousand dollars reward coming.”

Um!

VI

TUCK'S QUIET WEDDING

"I couldn't stand for that," said Tuck. "It aint fun. It's a outrage, and if that bunch of laughing jackasses done anything like it to me somebody would get shot."

Tuck was standing with me and watching a wedding sendoff at the depot. Two men—brothers—had got married on the same day and were trying to start on their wedding trip, but they were men that everybody in town knowed and their friends were all on hand to show them how much they loved them. The loving friends had got hold of some handcuffs and ironed the bridegrooms to a couple of telephone poles beside the depot and were pouring rice down their necks, while the engine was ringing to start and the brides, on the Pullman steps, were trying hard not to look worried about their new husbands.

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"Well, Tuck, you better begin to slicker-break that temper of yourn right now," said old Dad Pickett, who was standing near us. "Your turn will come next. You're about the popularest man in town, and when you and Chiquita Roper get hitched next month, or whenever it is, you'll be lucky to get away with your life. They will have their fun."

"Fun!" snorted Tuck, as the crowd unlocked the handcuffs and the bridegrooms chased the train down the tracks while the engineer slowed up for them. "Fun! Why, Dad, if one of them tousled onfortunates would turn round this minute and empty a sixshooter into that mob of yaps it would go against the grain for me to arrest him, even if I am a deputy sheriff."

"Old Dad's right, though," said I, as we walked away. "Your turn comes next. Chiquita will invite all the sensible people in town to your wedding, and the gladsome

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pinheads—which is the majority of the population—will be waiting outside to congratulate you with old boots and buckets of water and blank ca'tridges, just like they done to these fellows today. Nothing less than a public hanging would stir up the town the way your wedding will. A public man has got to put up with such things."

"Put up!" he frothed. "Do you reckon I'll put up with being drug around and mauled by a gang of giggling fools, while Chiquita and all the other women in town look on? Me? You know me better, Spike. I couldn't stand for it. It would mean me spending my wedding night in jail, charged with about seventeen justifiable homicides."

"Well, don't get so agitated about it," reasoned I. "You're still single. You can break the engagement, or mebbe Chiquita will consent to sneak off in the mountains and be married in a prospect hole."

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"I wonder if she would," meditated Tuck, and went off down the street with his chin on his chest.

With what I knowed of Tuck it did make me some oneasy to picture what might happen if the town cutups tried to mix in his wedding. Tuck was proud, and when anything touched his temper his friends would generally retire into the next county and let the wind blow on him until he cooled off. His mad never lasted very long, but neither does a cyclone. I'm a peaceable man and Tuck was my best friend, so I felt considerable lightened up in my mind when he rode in to my ranch a couple of weeks after that and told me his plans for a fool-proof wedding.

"It's tough on Chiquita," he said. "Her mother had put her up to expecting a grand blowout, but she's reasonable, bless her little heart! After all, the main thing she wants

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is me. The impression has sort of seeped round that we're going to be married some time the last of next week, and half the town is expecting subpoenas to the wedding, naturally. Instead of that, though, the event comes off tomorrow night at her father's house, with nobody there but relatives. There'll be the town Ropers and the ranch Ropers and my grandmother and you and Kittie Kirk. You and Kittie will stand up with us and help us look the Reverent in the eye, while the relations weep. The ceremony will be at nine o'clock, and then we'll slip down and catch the nine-forty west, and the town won't be wise until next day. The sheriff lets me off four weeks, and by the time we get back our wedding will be as old as the battle of San Jacinto, and there won't be no trouble."

Well, the next afternoon, I dressed up till it hurt and rode into town. I put away my

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horse and went into a restaurant and scoffed up a steak, not knowing just how much they might have to eat at the wedding, and then I went to the barber and had him work my head over every way he knowed how. By that time it was after eight, so I ambled up the street towards Ropers' house, wishing it was daylight and people could see me, for I looked fitten to be married myself.

As I went along the paths in the dark under the china trees I took notice of two or three bunches of men drifting along in the same direction with me, carrying things and talking low and snickering among themselves as if they were up to some devilment. Then along come two boys, one with a dish pan and the other with a wash boiler. When I reached the Roper place, instead of going round to the regular gate, I stepped over a low wall at the corner of the lot and set my foot down on something soft, and a kid that

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had been laying there in the grass give a little yelp and rolled out of the way, while I heard several snickers from bushes in the yard. It come over me that Tuck's wedding wasn't going to be as private as he had reckoned on.

When I got inside Tuck was standing there talking to the Roper folks, looking as handsome as a new saddle and as happy as a coyote in a hen house. I hated to spoil the picture but I was afraid to let things drift on, so I stepped up to him and pulled him over in the corner.

"Tuck, old boy," said I, hooking a finger in his buttonhole to keep him from jumping through the ceiling, "Tuck, you've been blowed on. They're next."

"Who's next?" he shot, changing face.

"The whole municippiality," said I, "including the dogs. The bushes and trees in the front yard are full of well-wishers, and

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they've fetched along all the old hardware that has been throwed on the dump since the first boom in the eighties. And they're still coming. It aint no use, pardner. You're a public man. Think what President Wilson had to stand for when he was in Europe. It will cost you about forty dollars for smokes, but you better put up with it."

"Forty or forty thousand!" he hissed. "Blister the money! It's the down-dragging disgrace of it. I won't stand for it." He got white and breathed like a bronco steer with a rope around its windpipe, which was a bad sign. "Wait till I see Chiquita," he said finally, and whipped into the next room.

In a few minutes he was back, and Chiquita with him. Chiquita looked some startled, but she was prettier than I ever seen her before, with her head up and her yes bright like a little brown filly at the start of a race.

TUCK'S QUIET WEDDING

"Jim Roper," snapped Tuck, "is your car out in front or back in the alley?"

"In the alley," said Jim. "Why?"

"We want it," said Tuck. "Half of all the fools under the Stars and Stripes are out in the front yard aiming to run this wedding, so there aint going to be no wedding—here. The Reverent aint here yet, so we'll slide over to his house in the car, get the hitching done and then hit for Agua Dulce and catch the train there. I—"

"Why, Tuck Williams," wailed Mrs. Roper, "you won't do any such thing, after all the trouble we've gone to over the decorations and everything. You spoiled our plans once, but now Chiquita is going to have some wedding to remember. It's a shame—"

"Now, mother," cooed Tuck, taking Mrs. Roper's face between his hands, "my nice little new mother—though to all human ap-

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pearances you're more like my little sister—the point is that Chiquita and I do want a wedding, a nice, decent, quiet wedding and not a free fight or a lunatic asylum broke loose. That's just the reason we got to leave you now, much as we hate it. Remember, you're going to give us a reception or something when we come home, and then you can invite all the first families—and the second ones if you want 'em—and throw on all the dog you please. But right now we must kiss you good night." And he kissed her, twice, and she give in.

"Keep all the lights going here," he went on, "and make all the fuss you can till after train time. Doug Roper, you sneak down to the depot and see that our baggage gets on, and we'll pick it up at Agua Dulce. You, Kittie, and you, Spike, come along with us for witnesses. On our way!"

In twenty seconds we were in Jim's car,

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with him at the wheel, and backed down the alley till we could get out at the other end of the block, which we done without attracting any of the mob in the front yard. We swung round the block and were on our way to the Reverent's house when, passing under a street lamp, I seen a kid on horseback pull up and stare at me on the front seat and then twist his neck to see into the back of the car. Then he pinwheeled his horse and loped off down the street towards Ropers', yelling: "Hey! Here they go! Here they are!" Tuck said something that he asked the girls' pardon for in the next breath and Jim put his foot down and forgot the speed limit until we stopped in front of the Reverent's. I hopped down and run to the front porch, where Mrs. Reverent happened to be setting out.

"Are you from Roper's?" she asked as soon as she seen me. "My husband had to go

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out in the country to see an awful sick man, but I'm expecting him back every minute. I'm sorry, so sorry—"

That was the last I heard from her, for I touched my hat and hiked back to the car without listening for more.

"No time to wait," said Tuck. "Drive to old Dad Pickett. He's a Justice of the Peace. Sorry, Chiquita," he purred to his bride. "I've got you down to a common, runaway, J. P. wedding at last, but I'll make it up to you some way."

The car turned round and started for Dad's house, but as we reached the corner we met up with three other cars, full of people and with some hanging on the running boards, and as soon as they seen us they begun to yell and laugh and blow tin horns. It's a bad plan ever to run away from anybody or anything, for the more you run the scareder you get. We really didn't have nothing to

TUCK'S QUIET WEDDING

run from them fellows for, yet at that minute I felt like a horse thief and I know Tuck felt like a jackrabbit with a bunch of these long-legged hounds after him. He reached forward and grabbed Jim's shoulder.

"Step on 'er!" he panted. "Step on 'er and get out of this."

"Where to?" said Jim.

"Out o' town. Step on 'er and lose 'em. There's a parson or a J. P. in Agua Dulce, and we'll have time before the train there."

So Jim stepped on 'er and we snored off down the street like a shell out of a big gun. When we left town and pitched down the hill into the Big Wash I had some doubts as to whether it was a wedding or a funeral we were going to, but we made the bottom right side up, plowed through the sand of the wash and started up the other side.

"We've shook 'em," said Tuck, looking back at the other hill. Then he went to say

SPIKE

something else, but thought of the girls in time. On the far rim of the wash two white eyes peeked over and started down, and then come a pair of yellow eyes, and then a pair of smoky reddish eyes, till there were six pairs of lamps streaking down the hill on our trail. We had a few hundred yards the start of them, and Jim give his whole soul to his car, lifting it up that hill and shooting it out across the flat in such a style that everybody picked out something solid to hang on to and give up talking. A mile or so farther on we were skidding round a curve on a little side hill when Jim slammed on the brakes and slowed up, as we glimpsed a team standing on two legs apiece in the glare of the lamps. I knowed that team, a sort of a pair of Christianized broncs with sleepy eyes—and Tuck knowed them too.

“Stop!” he hollered at Jim, jumping out over the back door. “It’s the Reverent.

TUCK'S QUIET WEDDING

Hey! Reverent, we need you."

There was no time to explain, so Tuck just naturally hopped the Reverent without another word—grabbed the old man round the middle and drug him out of his buck-board before he knowed what had happened. By the time I had dropped out and pulled the Christianized broncs away from the road and tied them to a mesquit bush, Tuck had boosted the Reverent into the car and was calling for me to hurry. The Reverent was the best old parson that ever said amen, and was a friend to most everybody round the country, but under the onmitigated circumstances he couldn't help being a good deal ruffled and some riled.

"What's the meaning of this?" he puffed, as the car started on and he begun to get his breath back. "Assault—kidnap—minister of the gospel—outrage!"

"All right, Reverent," said Tuck. "Call

SPIKE

me anything you like. I ask your pardon six different ways, but I had to do it. Don't you know me—Tuck Williams, that you were going to marry tonight? We changed our plans and we want you to marry us now, now, now, and get the knot tied good and hard before we reach Agua Dulce."

It took a minute or two for the Reverent to square himself with the points of the compass, but he had knocked round the cow country for years and he come through like a gentleman.

"Well, well, Tuck," he said finally. "Certainly, certainly. Onusual situation and not very convenient but perfectly lawful, perfectly lawful. Don't know just how much of the service I can remember in such conditions, but enough to bind the bargain, surely.

"Give us all you can remember," said Tuck, "and make it as strong and regular as

TUCK'S QUIET WEDDING

you can. We aint no common, low-down, fly-by-night couple, and we're sorry to do it this way, but our friends won't let us be respectable."

"And we're going to have the ring ceremony, Mr. Bennett," put in Chiquita. "Tuck, you haven't lost that ring, have you?"

Then the Reverent scrooched himself down, facing the victims and Kittie on the back seat, and I turned round to hear what went on, like a witness ought to, while Jim humped over his steering wheel and kept the wedding jumping across the landscape in the moonlight.

"Dearly beloved," begun the Reverent. "We are gathered together—" ?

About then we reached the foot of a long grade and the car slewed and stumbled along a ways through a stretch of sand, and then the engine give a gasp and died.

"What's the matter there?" barked Tuck.

SPIKE

"Luck!" said Jim. "The gas! Never thought of it. I aimed to fill that tank to-morrow morning. Didn't know I'd go out of town tonight."

We had stopped where the road edged along the bottom of a side hill covered with brush. About twenty feet from the car was a sharp cut 'royo about waist deep, the brightness of the moonlight on the ground making parts of it look lots deeper.

"Out of the car!" ordered Tuck. Everybody flatten out in that 'royo, and then they'll think we've took to the brush on the hill.

The first pair of eyes was already winking at us from the head of the grade, but before the second come in sight we were all at the bottom of the 'royo holding our breath, the Reverent being in the game as much as any of us by this time. It was a good dodge. The other cars come to a stop with a good

TUCK'S QUIET WEDDING

deal of noise, for they reckoned they had us for sure, and the people jumped out and started in a sort of a skirmish line up the hill, all but two or three girls that stayed in the cars. When the hunters had got a couple of hundred yards away, whooping and laughing and poking into every patch of shadow in the brush, Tuck inched himself up and looked over the edge of the 'royo. Then he settled back and spoke in a saw-edge whisper.

"MacDougal's new seven - passenger freight engine is empty," he said, "and the motor still running. When I give the word, get out and rush it. Now!"

Jim was first out, with the good old Reverent trotting after him, and Tuck and I followed as soon as we could help the girls up the bank. The women left in the cars give the alarm with all their hearts, and the bunch on the hill doubled back, but almost before

SPIKE

the last of us had tumbled in the big car give a roar and we were fanning it down the road again. It felt like home. Seemed as if we had been skittering across the country with a string of winking lamps spangling the moony road behind us for the last month, and it was natural and proper thing.

“Well,” breathed Tuck, “onfinished business of the last meeting. Let’s get married.”

So the Reverent, setting sideways in one of the little extra seats, took off his hat and went to work again. You wouldn’t believe it, but it was a mighty pretty wedding, some way, and solemn—I never heard anything solemnner since I was on the jury and listened to the judge sentence a man. With the moonlight country streaking it by on either side, I couldn’t help thinking how the Reverent was starting them two folks on a longer trail than the road to Agua Dulce, and one a heap more oncertain. The Reverent

TUCK'S QUIET WEDDING

didn't say his words; he sort of sung 'em, and it was fine.

"If anybody knows a good reason why this man and this woman should not be united together in the house of bondage, he better mention it right now or forever hold his peace."

So sung the Reverent, as well as I can remember, and we all held our peace, except the car, which Jim threwed into low about that time. We were pounding up a long hill while they were going through the steepest part of the ceremony, but the car made the grade fine, and so did Chiquita and Tuck, coming out with their "I wills" as sharp as rifle shots. Nobody hearing them could have any doubts about their intentions in the matter. About that time the car gathered her legs under her and raised over the top of the hill, and we looked out and down on a world of blue and silver, with the lights

SPIKE

of Agua Dulce blinking at the foot of the mountains, miles away. And right then, as seemed right, the Reverent hit the high spot in his solo.

"Therefore nevertheless by the authority invested in me by the State" (there it was all round us) "I pronounce you man and wife."

He finished off with something religious. It wasn't exactly "May the Lord have mercy on your souls"—that was what the judge said, I think—but it rolled out fine and had a grand, forever-more sound to it. I wasn't listening as close as a witness ought to just then, being busy watching way off to the east, where I could see a bright white light with a little smudgy streak behind it. It was our train. I touched Jim on the shoulder and pointed to it, and from then on MacDougal's car got a test for every nut and bolt in her that the makers ought to spread out over a full-page advertisement. Jim

TUCK'S QUIET WEDDING

wasn't to say a reckless driver but he had that sizzling wish to be somewhere else right off that most drivers get sooner or later, and he sure done himself proud that night. Agua Dulce fairly jumped at us out of the lonesomeness while we all held on with both hands, and I hadn't said my prayers over many more times before Jim ripped that car down the main street, tore her round the corner and jerked her up on her hind legs by the depot before the train steamed in.

There was still some signing of papers to be done, so we done it right then, with a fountain pen and a flash lamp and the flat of the Reverent's Bible, getting our names down all regular, if pretty scratchy, so the deed was plumb done at last and Tuck and Chiquita were hopelessly involved.

"Well," said Tuck, "we're married, good and married, and there wasn't no horseplay. It was all decent and nice and quiet."

SPIKE

Chiquita had been pretty quiet all evening but now she bubbled over in a little giggle that she couldn't hold back, and the rest of us laughed with her.

"You see Tuck Williams' notion of what is nice and quiet, Mr. Bennett," she said. "When he proposed to me he had to go and do it without any warning before a whole crowd of people, and now this wedding—what a life I've got before me!"

"Well, you can manage the next one," said Tuck, a little sheepish. "I'll own up that I bungled this some. I tell you; I've had my turn at bossing and made a mess of it, and now I'll turn the job over to you for the rest of our lives."

"Young folks," said the Reverent, putting a hand on the shoulder of each of them, "don't you ever mention that word, boss, between you, nor even think of it. That's my wedding present to you, and may the Lord

TUCK'S QUIET WEDDING

bless the two of you all the way down the long trail."

Then I done what I'd been planning on for ten miles; I walked up and kissed Chiquita. I knowed it was the last proper chance I'd ever have, and a chance to kiss her wasn't a thing to pass over. Tuck laughed and snatched her away to the train, for by this time the celebrators were arriving with a hailstorm of rice and a thunder of tin horns. They were up the steps into the Pullman vestibule in a wink and then the porter got a wallop on the ear with an old shoe, so he wasn't slow in following them, and the train slid away with showers of rice rattling against the windows.

As I turned away from watching the red tail lights down the track I found I was tired, and I had a deep, empty sort of lonesome feeling. When I have that lonesomeness I know I'm likely to do foolish things,

SPIKE

so when I climbed into the back seat beside Kittie I sat close over in my corner.

"Ever hear of such a crazy performance?" said I out of the side of my mouth.

"Why, Spike, it was perfectly thrilling, just glorious," chirped Kittie. "I'm sure I could stand it to go through something of the sort again—once, at least. Couldn't you?"

She looked up at me with her head on one side like a kitten, and there never was a girl whose eyes could come nearer twinkling in the dark than hers. I sort of caught my breath and shrunk deeper into my own corner. I do believe that the sight of a wedding to a girl is like a sniff of blood to a tiger. This is a beautiful world, but it's a dangerous and oneasy one for a single man to travel in.

VII

THE CHRONIC HERO

"Well, how's Chiquita?" said I to Tuck Williams, as he put his feet on my porch railing and lit up after eating dinner with me one day.

"She's all right," he answered, snapping away his match, "except that she's worried to death."

"Bad!" said I. "You aint gone and joined that poker-playing bunch up over the pool hall in town before you've been married three months, have you?"

"Me? Oh no," grinned Tuck. "I'm the gentlest domestic animal in town. She's worried over that boy out in the road, there."

I looked out to the road where a smart looking fellow in soldierish clothes was fussing over the engine of Tuck's car, and wondered.

SPIKE

"I don't see anything very worrisome about Ted Pickett," said I.

"Oh, there aint anything alarming about him alone," said Tuck, "but Chiquita is doing a lot of bothering about him and her little sister, Dolores. She's afraid of the combination."

"Dolores," said I, "does Dolores go with the young generalissimo?"

"Aint done anything else since he got home from a far country last month," answered Tuck. "That's why I've got him with me today. Chiquita makes me take him with me every time I go out of town on the sheriff's business, just so she can feel safe about Dolores for a couple of hours."

"Can't be as bad as that," I argued.

"Well, just look at him," said Tuck, "and tell me what he looks like to you."

"Let's see," said I, studying Ted as he leaned over the engine. "He aint got a tin

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hat, and his shirt aint tore out at the shoulder, nor blood dribbling down his bare arm, but otherwise he looks just like the boy that used to go romping over the shell holes and barbed wire in the war pictures."

"You got it," laughed Tuck. "And Dolores is seventeen years old and has been to the movies about three nights a week ever since she was seven. Her head has been full of heroes and runaway weddings for years on end, and now this rooster pops up out of nowhere, made to order. Chiquita had Dolores over to supper with us last night and she sat there looking like a sick kitten most of the meal, and poured gravy in her tea."

"Well," says I, "looks as if you better send over to Tucson for some orange blossoms and have the thing done at home, decent and regular. Have you got anything special against Ted?"

SPIKE

“He’s too fierce,” scowled Tuck, “and kills too many Germans. He attended the war very young and stayed in the army a couple of years afterward, and he’ll never get over the hero stuff. I met up with a real, registered, certified hero down at El Paso, a man that come home from France with three medals on his chest, and I couldn’t get him to talk about anything in the war but the cooties and the wine. But this Ted— he talks like a packing house. Germany must have two or three military graveyards named after him. And the worst of it is, I’m morally certain he would be scared to operate the trigger of anything more deadly than a gasoline engine and never smelled any poison gas but cigarette smoke. I aint got any way of proving him a blowhard, though, so I reckon he’ll turn out to be my brother-in-law and I hate it.”

Before he could say anything more Ted

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come stalking back to the house and went inside the kitchen to wash the grease off his hands.

"You seem to have that engine running nice and creamy, Ted," said Tuck.

"Oh, that's easy," said Ted, coming out wiping his hands, "easy enough when you don't have to do it under fire. Did you ever work much under fire in the service?"

"None to speak of," said Tuck, with a quiver of the eyelid on my side.

"It's a mean place to have a balky engine," said the hero. "When they get the range so the shells begin to spit dirt and rocks in among your cylinders while you're working it makes you sore."

"Must be plumb aggravating," agreed Tuck, who had a long scar under his shirt that wasn't made in America. "Say, Ted, I reckon I have to go down on the river about next Monday and arrest a couple of men that

SPIKE

are bad hombres. I'll get you sworn in as a deputy and then if they give any trouble you may get a taste of the good old times."

Ted changed face a little and his mouth hung open and he run his fingers through his wavy yellow hair before he answered.

"Monday?" he studied. "Well, no. I'd like it, but I promised to take Dolores out to Satterlee's ranch on Monday."

"All right; Dolores outranks me," said Tuck. "Are you going to be here at home Sunday, Spike?"

"I reckon so," I answered.

"Well, I'll bring Chiquita out for dinner, then," said he. "She's talked about coming till I'd be jealous if it was anybody but you, and mebbe I will anyway."

"You got plenty of cause to be, so far as I'm concerned," said I. "I can't never forgive you for marrying Chiquita, but I've done set my jaw to suffer in silence and let you be

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happy. Fetch her out, and bring Ted and Dolores along."

"Make it Sunday, then," said he, getting up. "That will give you two days to scrub up yourself and the house before you receive the ladies. Come on, Ted. We got to hit it for town."

Mebbe I done about my usual work for the rest of the afternoon but I don't remember anythng of it, for I was thinking of something else. Dolores Roper was still a good deal of a kid, long and rangy and running pretty much to bone, but she had some promising thoroughbred points and a smile that give you the notion of a flash of light. For two or three years I had liked to set round and look at her, like she was a picture. I wasn't in love with her, understand, nor jealous of her, but sometimes I would get to thinking about her, and scheme, and wonder. I wasn't ready to marry, by a whole

SPIKE

lot, but I had Dolores staked out in the back of my head as a sort of a possibility. I wonder if every single man don't have the same idea about some young girl he knows. Might-bes are always interesting to turn over in your mind; they don't cost nothing but a little spare time, and the onlikelier they are the finer they look through your tobacco smoke after supper.

Anyway, I disapproved of her and our hero, Ted Pickett. He was just a overgrown kid with the military fever, horribly stuck on his own magazine-picture face and straight, slim body, and probably a whole lot of a liar. He might turn out gold or mud, but I didn't want Dolores to take a chance on him at this stage of the game. If she had to get married there were lots of men that would be better for the purpose, or a few at least—or one, anyway.

I talked about it to my cats and dogs that

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evening and then went to bed and slept on it. Next morning I saddled up and rode over to Al Stidder's and had a mild argument with him about a calf, and loped home by noon feeling pretty cheerful. After dinner I got a couple of buckets of water and some soap and a brush and broom and some rags and went to work on the house. It's a solemn and awful thing when an old bach on the range has lady callers, and I always liked to have plenty of warning of them events so I could purify things and say my prayers. I spent the whole afternoon on my knees—with the scrub-brush—while the dogs quit the house altogether and the cats roosted round on chairs and tables, watching the flood spread and looking miserable. Then after supper I het a tubful of water and went after myself as fierce as I had the floors, and finally rolled into bed so clean that I felt ready to die.

SPIKE

It's painful for any sane person to have to stand round and watch people in love. Dolores was glad enough to see me—she always did treat me like her daddy, the imp!—but I couldn't hold her attention to what I said for two minutes all that Sunday. It was "Hello, Spike, old scout," when she got there, and she seemed about as healthy as usual, but I hadn't said ten words to her when I took notice she wasn't listening to me, but had her head turned towards Ted. He was talking to Chiquita about shells or tanks or boshes or something.

"Hasn't he seen a lot of the world?" whispered Dolores, with her eyes all wide and shiny.

"He has sure seen something that upset him considerable," said I.

"You needn't be jealous of him," she hit back, pushing out her red under lip at me. "It wasn't his fault that a horse rolled on

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your leg and the doctors wouldn't let you into the army."

"I aint jealous, my dear," I sighed. "I'm just sad. Sometimes lately I've thought that if it had only been something that rolled on my head, I might have got to France."

She didn't catch the full heft of that, but laughed up at me with the sudden flash that always made me wink.

"Cheer up, Spike," she said. "You're such a queer old maverick that you never would have made a good soldier, but you're a good housekeeper, anyway. The house looks beautiful. And here's old Blue, with the tip of her ear cut off and one squinty eye; same old cat. How's old kittwumpus, hm?"

She swung old Blue up in her arms and turned away just in time so I could stick my head behind the door and swear. Good

SPIKE

housekeeper! What a blazing, sizzling consolation it is to a he man to have a pretty girl tell him he's a good housekeeper, when there's a soldier boy standing by all full of glory and thunder. It come to me for the first time just how far that kid had me out-classed. I was only dear, dear old grandma!

That's the way it went all day. At the table I was trying to tell how a ornery bull got between me and my horse on a open flat the week before, but Ted drewed away all my audience by telling how interesting it is to have a bum land in your cup of coffee when you're eating in the trenches, or something like that. And every time Ted would shoot off a war story, Dolores would draw a long breath and her eyes would shine. Chiquita, bless her heart, had fetched out a lot of woman-cooked stuff for dinner and I tried to cure the pain in my feelings by heavy applications to my stomach, but the good stuff didn't taste right, somehow.

THE CHRONIC HERO

Along in the afternoon, while we were talking on the porch, I went in and reached down my rifle from over the door. That rifle was the apple of my heart and I was proud of it, though I never got to use it more than a couple of weeks a year, when I went to the big mountains.

"What do you know about that instrument?" said I to Ted, handing it to him.

He was setting crosslegged in the doorway because he looked graceful and picture-like that way, and knowed it, and he took the rifle and turned it over in his hands and tried the action.

"She's some gun," he said, "but a little lighter than the army rifle and probably I couldn't hit much with her. It's funny, but I'm never much of a shot onless I'm excited or mad. With a long aim at a tin can I can't hit anything, but give me a quick snapshot at a man and I'm there."

SPIKE

"Tough on the man," said Tuck.

"Yes, it is, generally," smiled Ted. "One day in the Argonne I crawled out about a mile and got a sniper that had been bothering for a day or two. It was a long shot and poor light but I was awful excited and mad when I got sight of him. 'Wham!' says my rifle, just once, and that Heiny sprung clean out of his shelter and rolled down the hill. When I got back to the trench a French officer happened there, and he kissed me on both cheeks."

I was setting inside the doorway where I couldn't see Dolores, but I heard her draw her usual long breath in a way that made me reckon she was jealous of the French officer, and I gritted my teeth. About that time Al Stidder loped down the road, tied his horse to the corral and come bowlegging towards the house. For some reason he was wearing a long sixshooter slung down his right leg

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in the old style, his face was full of thunder and lightning. Al was a Texas man and he didn't look comforting in that condition, so I lifted the rifle off of Ted's knees and clicked a shell into the barrel while they were all watching the visitor. Al seemed a little put out at the sight of the company and spoke to them pretty short, and then, not seeming to to hear Chiquita ask about his wife's health, he frowned down at me and begun to talk.

"This morning I seen that red Bar O calf we talked about yesterday," he said in a low voice that rattled in his throat, "and it was following one of my Three C cows. Now this thing has gone about far enough, and I'm here for a settlement."

"Set down and make yourself good-natured, Al," said I, as quiet as I could. "There's ladies present and this aint the place to talk business."

"Ladies or no ladies," he croaked, getting

SPIKE

louder, "I aint going to take such things laying down no longer. You've been stealing my stuff for two years now, and I'm going to collect off of you or take it out of your hide."

"You better darn your own socks," said I, beginning to get riled. "How about that time, last roundup, when you claimed the paint maverick down at Satterlee's place and swore it was your old Speck's calf? Satterlee said he had kept track of all your claims to loose stuff and, accordng to your tell, old Speck had had sixteen calves in two years."

"Old Speck aint neither here nor there," he come back. "This here calf aint a maverick. It's my calf with your brand on it, and I aint going to take such things no longer."

"Leave 'em, then, and shut up!" said I.

"See here," cut in Tuck in a oneasy voice, "you two cut out this barking or I may have to jail the both of you."

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"Keep out of this, Tuck Williams," snapped Al. "You're a officer of the law and all that there, but this aint a law proposition. It's particular private business and I won't settle it any way but man to man."

"Yes, if you're man enough," I sniffed.

"I'll show you whether I'm man enough," answered Al. beginning to shout. "You, with your nice, ladylike ways! You hate to have this happen before your lady friends, but it's about time somebody in this country found out that you're a common, low-down cow thief."

"You take that back," I spluttered, hitching the rifle round. "You swallow that or I'll make you swallow something a heap harder in about two seconds. I'll stand a whole lot for the sake of decency, but I aint going to be bullyragged no longer by a camel-built Texas cotton-picker."

"Cotton-picker!" It was the old Texas

SPIKE

cow man's fighting word, a word full of blood and battle. Al's face seemed to get white and his eyes flared; he sort of gulped and choked and then his hand shot down his hip. In the same second I swung up the rifle and things ended in scattering crashes and a swirl of smoke.

I didn't look to see if Al fell. I was watching Ted. He set there on the threshold between us during this cordial conversation, looking back and forth at Al and me with a sort of empty grin on his face. The eyes of the girls were pretty wide, but he had his mouth open too. At the second when Al and I went into action he just simply faded out of his place and went down the length of the porch. He wasn't exactly running. He moved more like a airplane does just after it lifts off of the ground. The end of the porch was closed by a net of strings with hop vines trained up it, but he never

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seen them at all. He hit them in full flight, went through them with a rip, took the air again and flew right on until he whipped out of sight behind the hen house.

Al and I lowered our artillery and stood looking at each other with our faces twisting and our bodies quivering, but never spoke a word. It was a sacred minute, too perfect to be spoiled by any undignified racket. Tuck was the first to break it. He grabbed me by the ears and kissed me on both cheeks—loud—and then he done the same to Al.

“A la Francy! Oh, you **precious pups!**” he sung. “You done it so well you had me scared up to the last minute. I reckoned I’d have another murder case to bother about next term of court. Oh, you dear, sweet fightin’ tarantlers! What do you know about it, Chiquita? Did you ever—” and so he went on.

SPIKE

After a minute Ted edged himself out from behind the hen house and come back a whole lot slower than he went, pretty red in the face but game to the last.

"I hope you birds are enjoying yourselves," he said. "One of the things they hammered into us in the army was always to take cover under fire onless it was absolutely necessary to be exposed. Say, Dolores, let's take a walk up to the top of the hill. Spike says you can see a lot of country from there."

"No thanks," said Dolores, her words fuzzy with frost. "Not onless somebody goes along to guard us. We might meet one of Spike's old cows or something."

"While I think of it, Ted," said Tuck, looking up at a hole that Al had shot in the porch roof, "I met a old comrade of yours over in Douglas yesterday, a fellow named Elright or Enright or some such name. He

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says he fought shoulder to shoulder with you at the same desk in England all the time you were overseas."

Enough is a plenty. At Tuck's words poor Ted wilted, and looked just like I felt on the day that I stole my dad's pipe and tried a smoke when I was eight years old. After all, he had served his country honest and faithful as far as the country asked him to, and a long spell of the hero fever had made him thirsty for glory. War is war, but I reckoned if we carried the thing any further we'd be atrocities.

"Well, the war's over," said I, reaching round behind the door and fishing out my guitar. "Let's be merry. Tuck, you dance that double flipflop like you used to in the bunk house when we both worked down on the old home ranch. Lively, now, or I'll have Al shoot at your feet."

So we all looked the other way and give

SPIKE

our hero a chance to pick himself up and put himself together again. Just before the crowd rolled out for town I happened to be with Chiquita and Tuck in the setting-room, and she slipped her hand into mine.

"I'll sleep easier tonight than I have for a month, Spike," she said," and I think you're pretty fine. If you should ever want me to, I believe I can learn to"—she glanced out on the porch where Dolores was romping with one of my dogs—"I believe I can learn to love you like a sister."

Then she and Tuck laughed and left me standing there, feeling foolish. A woman's eyes are sure good for something else than just to be looked at. How do you reckon she ever guessed?

VIII

THE PRICE OF LIBERTY

"Honest, I don't see how I can promise to come to your party, Kittie," said I. "I may get caught on a jury tomorrow."

"No; I thought of that," said Kittie, hemming me in. "I asked the state's attorney and he said this murder case might last three days yet. They've got ever so many witnesses."

"Well," said I, moving a peanut shell round on the sidewalk with my toe and thinking hard, "I'd like to come, nothing I'd like better, but I'm mighty poor company. Honest, Kittie, since I come to town on jury duty I've had so many parties and shows, and three nights in the jury room, the best part of 'em upon my elbow in the cot arguing law and evidence with some other bonehead on the case, that I'm near dead for sleep and onfit for human society. Ask Ted Pickett

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in my place. He's smart and a hero and I'm sleepy and a cow herder."

"Ted Pickett is asked already," said she, a little sad, "but I happen to want you. It's my birthday and I want my friends. Aren't you my friend? I used to think you were."

"Oh, yes," said I "of course, but, Kittie, you got a whole town full of friends. There's Ted Pickett; he's fine, and there's several other boys. And then all the girls—"

"Oh, girls!" sniffed Kittie. "Spike, you've no idea how hard it is for a girl to find friends among girls. And Ted—he's nice enough, but he's so kiddish. The kind of friend I want is a man, a man of sense and steadiness, and I thought I had him in you. But if you don't care for my friendship and don't like me, you are free to do as you please. I never forced my company on anybody—"

"Oh, don't!" I groaned, seeng what was coming. "Do you reckon I would lope round

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with you all the time if I had a horror of you? I was just a little tired, but it's awful good of you to ask me to your party and—"

"Then you'll be there?" she asked, coming out from under the cloud and beginning to shine on me again.

"I'll come, and thanks," I answered.

I drifted on along the street, feeling sort of beat down. She had got the best of me again. Friends? Yes; Kittie and me had been friends once, but ever since the night of Tuck Williams' wedding when we stood up with Tuck and Chiquita—or at least made out to get them married in a automobile at forty miles an hour—Kittie had changed and been something else than a friend to me. Friends? Sure I like friends. Tuck Williams was my friend, best in the world, but Tuck didn't snuggle against my arm when we were in a car together, nor smile at me with his eyes half closed and then

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catch his breath and bite his lip and look away at the scenery, nor talk to me all the time about other people's love affairs, and engagements, and weddings, and house furnishings, including babies, nor—understand, I aint saying a word against Kittie. I'd lick the first man to say that Kittie was bold. She wasn't. The most I'd own up about her in that line was that sometimes she was—well, a little brave, in a quiet way.

I stopped in front of a jeweler's window. One awful thing that Kittie had done ever since I come to town on the jury was to load me with small favors till she near broke my back. She had made a ton of candy for me, and toted me round in her father's car, and got me invited to parties, and sewed buttons on my coat, and I don't know how many other things, till I felt as much in debt as Europe. Now tomorrow was her birthday and I had forty-some dollars in my pocket,

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and here was my chance to square up. I turned away from the jewelry window, though. If I got her anything expensive and nice it would be the same as putting our engagement in the paper. Tuck Williams' wife had told me that a man aint supposed to buy a girl anything but flowers and books onless they're engaged. There was no flower store in town, so I went into the drug store and begun to paw over their stock of books. I thought of poetry first, but decided against it. Poetry was mostly about love, and a whole book of it might cinch me to Kittie as tight as a diamond ring. Same way with novels; she might want me to read the novel out loud to her or something and the soft spots would be pretty thin to skate over. Finally I run into the history of the French Revolution in two volumes that looked good. It didn't have no pictures, but Kittie was quite a reader and

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didn't need no pictures to tole her along, and the binding looked pretty prosperous.

"Likewise," thinks I, "from all I've heard tell of the French Revolution, them books won't have a dangerous amount of love in them." So I bought them.

I showed up at Kirk's a little late the next night, with my French Revolution done up in pink ribbons. Kittie thanked me but didn't open her present, and I was glad for I had a notion that them lovely histories wouldn't make her quite as happy as some things I might have brought her.

Everybody was there, except Dolores Roper, who had been out of town for the last month. I had mourned some about Dolores, because I had tried about every other antidote for Kittie that I could think of and I sort of dreamed that Dolores might save me some way. But Dolores was too far away to protect me, and Kittie penned

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me in a confidential corner and told me her troubles in a whisper.

"Daddy's away and we've been having a terrible time about this party," she said. "Mother was going to hire Mrs. Briggs to help, but Mrs. Briggs is sick and I've got to stay in here with the folks and poor mother is almost worked to death. I wonder if you'd mind turning the ice cream freezer just a few minutes and a few little things like that. Poor mother will bless you till the end of her life." And she led me out into the kitchen.

"Why, Spike, bless your dear heart!" said poor mother, who wasn't poor at all, but would come to about two hundred and fifty, live weight. "You mustn't fuss round here in that pretty blue suit. Here, let me put this apron on you."

So she done it and I went to work. There wasn't much to do, I found, but I felt in

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my bones that Kittie was getting all out of it that she had reckoned on, for the kitchen door was open and women would glance in now and then, and when they seen me in the apron—likewise as good as tied to the string of Mrs. Kirk's apron—them women would look at each other and smile, and smile. I was the old family horse, you see.

It was all as good as settled. The old lady was awful nice to me but I was so rattled and upset so many things that it must have been a relief to her to thank me and tell me there wasn't nothing else I could do and send me in the front room.

We had games and all the foolish things they generally have at parties. Then Kittie played on the piano, and I must own up she done it well. When I was awful young I always reckoned I'd marry a piano player, but since then I've wondered if it wouldn't be cheaper to buy one—the mahogany kind

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that is easy to manage. It was a good party, all right, if Kittie hadn't kept laying her hand on my sleeve and drawing me off into corners and asking my advice about things and—worse—making people smile, and smile.

About the time folks begun to go home she herded me into a corner again and said: "Spike, you know daddy's away and we've got three tickets to the concert at the chautauqua tent tomorrow night. I don't care much for it, but poor mother hasn't missed a number, and we don't like to go without a man, and I was wondering—"

"What time?" said I, feeling as if I might as well give in first as last.

"Oh, you poor boy! You do look tired. Would it be better for you to come up tomorrow night and just talk and smoke and rest? If it wasn't for poor mother—"

"What time? what time?" I cut in, for

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when Kittie got sympathetic she was dangerouser to me than a rattlesnake in August. At them times I wasn't only scared of her but scared of myself.

"Well, about eight, if you're sure you want to go," said she. "And now do run straight home and go to bed and get a good rest. I'm worried about you."

I had a room at Tuck's house while I was in town, so I walked down the street with him and Chiquita.

"Well, congratulations, old lizard," said Tuck. "Chiquita and I will stand by you and do as much for you in your day of disaster as you done for us."

"Oh, shut up!" said I. "You know there aint nothing to it."

"You might as well throw up you hands and be disarmed," went on Tuck, "while Chiquita giggled. This here country is a democracy and public opinion rules, and

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for the last two weeks public opinion in town—at least the female part of it—has been busy planning a ranch house for you and Kittie, and wondering if Kirk would give you any of his money, and figuring on how you were going to get along with the old lady and—”

“Can’t you cork him up, Chiquita?” said I.

“But he’s telling the truth, Spike,” said she. “When a man rushes a girl the way you have Kittie—”

“Rushes!” sputtered I. “Oh, if you only knowed!”

“But it looks that way, Spike,” she went on, “and Kittie doesn’t deny anything. A woman—”

“A woman,” I growled, “goeth about like a roaring lion, seeking whom she may devour. I got to take a walk before I roll in. Good night.”

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I whirled off down a side street but I could still hear Tuck laughing when I had got a block away. So everybody was talking about it, then, and the women had it all finished except signing the marriage license! A man has a horrible drift towards doing the thing that everybody expects him to do. What chance did I have in a lone fight for freedom if Kittie had the whole town at her back? I felt like a poor little calf with the loop round him being drug to the branding fire, and the first thing I knowed cold chills begun to chase themselves up my back and my teeth begun to knock together. I stopped a ways further on and leaned up against a tree, half forgetting Kittie in the queer experience of feeling sure-enough sick for the first time in about twenty years. Doc. Burchard's house was on the next corner, and I wobbled across the street and rung the bell.

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"Sorry, Spike," said Doc., after he had asked me a lot of questions and made me smoke the glass tube. "I took another case just like you out to the pesthouse tonight. You've got the smallpox."

"Smallpox!" I shouted. "Glory hallelujah! Safe at last!"

"Most of 'em don't take the news that way," said he, looking at me funny and laying his finger on my wrist again. "You must lose your head awful easy with fever. Come on out and I'll bring the car round."

I was feeling better by next afternoon and laid in my cot at the pesthouse, staring at the whitewashed ceiling and wishing all the other folks in the house were as light and free and happy as I was at that minute. Kittie and poor mother and all the smiling, interested, deadly town ladies seemed a thousand years away. About then a Mexican boy that was one of the patients come

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to my cot with a little blue note in Kittie's handwriting, and said that Ted Pickett was out in the street and wanted to know how I was. I drew a long, sad breath, and all the lightness and freeness and happiness evaporated out of me along with it.

"Tell her—him—I'm doing fine," said I.

The pesthouse couldn't save me. In fact, I was worse off there than I was outside, because I couldn't run away and she always knowed just where I was. The second day after that, when I had got out of bed and was playing pinochle with a barber, I seen the Kirk car pull up in the street, with Ted Pickett at the wheel and Kittie beside him, and I near had a relapse.

"Muchacho," said I, slipping the Mexican boy a quarter, "go and tell them folks in the car that I aint able to come out yet."

He went, and then he come back with a

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pretty basket full of fruit. It had a little of everything fresh and tasty in it, that basket. There was even a couple of pomegranates. Where she rustled them I don't know, for I hadn't seen half a dozen pomegranates in ten years, but she had got them as—I shivered—as she generally got everything else she went after. Every two or three days come a message from her and something good to eat, and every time the Mexican boy turned away, grinning, I dug my fingers into my hair and groaned. She was so good to me! You see, the only way I could ever break away from her was by saying or doing something rough and ornery, and how could I go through with such a outrageous performance after all her goodness. I could see that these little goodnesses would just naturally pile up and pile up till the weight of them would mash all the fight out of me and leave me a sort of

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a quivering jelly. Then I'd have to drop down on my knees in front of her and say: "Here, take my life in part payment, and I'll give you a mortgage on my chance of Heaven for the rest." Yet there were some shreds of fight left in me, and I would lay awake at night saying to myself: "I won't! I won't! I won't!" and trying to keep my head clear.

"I got to get out of this," I said one day to the nurse, as I was passing a big box of cake among the prisoners. "I just naturally got to."

"Your time's up day after tomorrow, Spike," said the nurse, "and you certainly can't go till then. What's the matter? Don't you like us?"

"Oh, I love you," said I,—*"all of you,"* I added on, for just then I realized that it was dangerous to say such words to one woman at once. "But I'm used to open air

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and open range and if I stay here much longer I'll bust something."

Well, day after tomorrow come dragging along and with it come Tuck in the sheriff's car and, as I had been excused from jury duty, I had him shoot me straight out to the ranch. I knowed that the only decent and human thing to do was to go and thank Kittie before I left, but I just didn't dare. Home and freedom and quiet and lonesomeness were as sweet as honey to me as I stepped into my own house again, and I picked up old Blue and scratched her under the chin, while a dog was dancing round me and pawing the dirt all over my best clothes. After Tuck and the man that had been staying on the ranch in my place went back to town, I clumb into my working duds once more, singing:

I never could stand the sting of a brand;
Wild grass is the sweetest to munch.

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Don't try to catch me; I'm ornery and free
And lope in my own little bunch,
Ee—e—ow!

I herd by myself in a bunch.

And then I went out in the corral and played and wrestled a whole hour with a sorrel colt.

Next morning while I was in the corral, fixing the float valve and whistling, I heard a car full of people stop out in the road and looked up and seen Kittie coming towards me. I quit whistling and took my hat in one hand and my nerve in both of them and went to meet her. It wasn't so bad as I had expected at first. She scolded me for not seeing her before I left town, but I told her I was terrible bashful about the looks of my face and, besides, I was afraid to expose her to such a catching disease, and I got away with that, all right.

"What a beautiful place this ranch is,

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Spike," she said. "Will you mind if I bring mother out here Sunday in the car and spend the afternoon? Poor mother gets out so little, and it will be a great treat to her."

And the villain still pursued me! Something like that run through my head, though Kittie wasn't no villain, understand, and I aint got a word to say against her.

"Why—why, I tell you," said I, stalling for time. "Tuck and Chiquita have been aiming to come out for a long while and we might as well make a party of it. And Chiquita's sister—I hear she's back in town."

"Dolores? Yes; I met her yesterday." Dolores is such a darling if she wasn't such a rude slangy, rowdy youngster. I wonder what her mother can be thinking."

"Well, she can't hurt nothing out here," said I. "Her and Tuck and Chiquita—and Ted Pickett. That'll be about right, with your mother to oversee the bunch, and

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you girls wear your riding togs, for white stuff and silks don't match the decorations of my kitchen exactly."

At first I really didn't have no special idea in making Kittie's visit into a party—just a sort of a general measure of self-defence—but that evening three cow men come riding in from the the Chiricahuas and put up all night with me. Next morning a friend of theirs come along in a car and they decided to go to town by gasoline and leave their horses and saddles with me for a few days. Them extra saddles give me the glimmering of a plan of campaign and, that being Saturday night, I laid awake a long time working it out.

Come Sunday morning and all the crowd of folks, and we partied according to program. I hope some of them enjoyed it—poor mother, at least—but my fun was a little soured by various things. If I talked to

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Dolores, Kittie looked sort of stony, and if I talked to Kittie, Tuck would drop one eyelid and make faces at me behind her back till I wanted to throw the furniture at him. One thing done me good, though. I was watching Kittie talk to Ted Pickett and I seen her look up at him sort of wilty, with her eyes half closed, like she used to look at me. The flirt! It made me mad, and then in the next second I was mad at myself for being mad. What a mixed up mess this man and woman business is, anyway. But it crusted over my heart for what I aimed to do that day.

We had dinner, and then I saddled up four horses and Kittie and Dolores and Ted and I went off for a ride, leaving Chiquita and Tuck to chin with Mrs. Kirk on the porch. We rode over the hill in a bunch and then along the foot of the mountains, past the mouths of a lot of little bushy gulches, till

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finally I pulled up and raised in my stirrups and put one hand over my eyes like the scouts do in pictures.

"I guess that's her," said I, "that yearling heifer, and I've got to get the brand changed on her pretty pronto or have trouble with the old man. No time like the present. Here, Dolores, you're some cowgirl; you come along and help me and we'll let the town folks take their time."

I rode ahead, taking down my rope, while Dolores loped besides me, all interested and excited. When the heifer seen us she stared a minute and then hoisted her tail and scampered up a gulch, just as I had reckoned she would, with us hot after her. We followed her a couple of hundred yards, and then I pulled in and went to putting up my rope again.

"Sorry, but it's a false alarm," said I. "That aint the right heifer, after all."

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Dolores was disappointed, but she wasn't the sort to stay disappointed long and she soon found something new to interest her.

"Oh, what a funny rainbow cactus!" she chirped, swinging off her horse. "I'll sure have to cop that. Mother has most every kind of sticker in the world in our front yard, but here's a new one."

"Dolores, lovely kid," I purred, as I got down and begun to dig up the cactus with my knife, "are you a true friend of mine?"

"Sure," said Dolores. "Haven't we always been good pals?"

"Will you do me a never-to-be-forgot favor, old scout," said I.

"Sure mike! Anything up to a million dollars—"

"In about twenty seconds I want you to put your arms round my neck and kiss me."

"Wh-at?" said Dolores, staring at me and backing away.

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"Don't take it that way," I begged, getting up from my knees. "This aint no ordinary foolishness. Besides, you don't really need to kiss me if you don't want to. A couple of inches more or less between our faces won't make no difference. All I want is the general effect. I'll tell it all to Chiquita when we get back and she'll say you done just right. Honest, it's no joke; it's near a matter of life and death with me. Please, old pal—now! now!"

Dolores' face was a picture of all kinds of feelings in a general scramble right then, but she was a good, game pal and she slipped her arms round my neck and kissed me square on the mouth just as Kittie and Ted rode into sight round a clump of brush about a hundred feet away.

"Well, is that enough?" said Dolores.

"Not quite." I answered, looking over her shoulder. "Hold the clinch about as long as they do in the last reel of the movies."

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Under my hatbrim I seen Kittie and Ted jerk their hores up all of a sudden and stare at us and then each other, and then they whirled round and went out of sight again, while I give a gurgly giggle. I looked down at Dolores. She was patiently sticking on the job like I told her to, bless her heart, but she didn't seem to be suffering much, though her face was some puzzled. I noticed then for the first time that the weight of her long young arms on my neck felt mighty pleasant and that my head was beginning to swirl a little. It come to me that, if I didn't look out, I might soon find that I had crawled out of Kittie's skillet only to fall into a fataller fire. But Dolores had lent me a kiss and I always aim to keep square with my friends, so I handed her a kiss back—with a little interest, mebbe—and then I broke away and mopped my face with my shirt sleeve and laughed and laughed.

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"Now, for the love of Pete—" begun Dolores, her face full of questions.

"Not yet, pardner," said I, waving her off. "It would be too painful to give explanations now, but if you'll only wait and keep your eyes open I reckon things will explain themselves soon. But I will say that probably you have saved me from a awful fate this day, and I owe you more than life. Shake!"

We shook and then got on our horses and jogged home, me saying and singing all sorts of foolishness along the way, while Dolores watched me and studied over something. We had been home a good two hours before Kittie and Ted showed up, and as I watched them come in from the gate I tried to act natural but I felt pretty hot and excited. They stopped when they come onto the porch and looked at each other, and then Ted took Kittie's hand and held it out to-

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wards us as if he was trying to sell something.

"There's no diamond on this finger now, folks," sad he, "but there's going to be one just as soon as the jewelry store opens in the morning—"

"Oh, bless your dear hearts!" squealed Mrs. Kirk, and made for them. You can bet I was close behind her, squeezing Ted's free hand almost before poor mother had begun to cry into his shirt pocket. During the excitement I sneaked a glance at Dolores and found her eyeing me in a dumfounded way that made me think Tuck and Chiquita must have loaded her up with a whole lot of misinformation about Kittie and me. I grinned at her but the grin she sent back was still doubtful and puzzled. As we got quiet again it was a treat to me to see Kittie with Ted setting on the arm of her chair, with his hand on her shoulder. She looked so con-

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tented that my conscience, which had been batting its eyes a little, rolled over and pulled the cover up to its nose and went off to sleep agian. I noticed, though, that Kittie kept shooting sly little looks at Dolores and me and pretty soon, to change the subject and shut off Tuck's jokes, she said: "Spike, have you made your announcement yet?"

"What!" shot Chiquita, looking at Dolores.

"My announcement?" said I, scratching my head.

"Oh, forgive me," said Kittie. "Perhaps you wanted to keep it dark for awhile, but I might as well go on now. Ted and I saw you and Dolores up that gulch where you had gone after that cow, and you looked—the way you were standing—well, it seemed as if an announcement was about the next thing."

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The sudden light flashed up in Dolores' face and a dozen imps danced in each of her eyes. I knowed that she got my whole game now and was uncontrollably tickled about it, so I laughed and went on and told my lie with perfectly quiet nerves.

"Oh, that was just a case of deceiving appearances, Kittie," said I. "It happened this way. Dolores and me were digging up a cactus she wanted when a centipede about as long as my lariat, more or less, dropped off of a dead yucca stalk onto her shoulder and started wriggling up towards her neck. Dolores does most detestably abominate them insects, and when I flipped the thing off and killed it her way of showing her thankfulness startled me almost as much as it did you and Ted. But it didn't have no far-reaching significance, as the papers say."

Women are great in some ways. Kittie never quivered a eyewinker. She just reach-

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ed up and took hold of Ted's hand, looking contenteder than before, if that was possible.

"Glory be to Daniel Webster," said Tuck, grinning through his cigar smoke at the lovers. "'Liberty and union, now and forever, one and inseparable.'"

"Dan Webster may have been a smart man," objected I, "but I don't see how he had the nerve to say 'liberty' and 'union' in the same breath. If he was a married man he must have knowed that the two ideas don't jibe, and if he was single he could have easy guessed it, like I have."

"So?" cooed Kittie, and she smiled up at Ted, sort of wilty, with her eyes half closed.

IX

SCAT!

I must have knowed Dolores and old Blue about three years apiece when they got joggled together in my mind, one of them standing for married life and the other for the easy-go-lucky ways of a bach. Dolores was a handsome girl, but old Blue couldn't hardly be called a handsome cat. One day in a fit of devilment some of the boys had cropped old Blue's left ear and, though it didn't hurt her much, it made a big difference in her looks. Besides that, when she was under my feet in the kitchen one evening I accidentally spilt a drop of hot bacon grease on her eyelid which give it a permanent droop, so between her cropped ear and her everlasting wink, old Blue looked too wise and wicked to be a perfect lady.

Old Blue was a comfort and a joy to me during my lone and happy days on the ranch.

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When I got my dishes washed of a night and r'ared back in the rocker with my guitar to sing awhile and settle my supper, old Blue would drift in from the kitchen, licking her chops, and set down in the corner and give herself a tongue bath, rubbing her paw over and over her cropped ear and her bum eye until she felt, I reckon, a heap more respectable than she looked. Then she would wait for the end of the music, blinking at me with her eyes all bleary with sleepiness, and the minute I laid down the guitar and picked up a magazine she would hop up and stretch out on my leg, purring and digging her claws into my knee to tell me what a fine place she thought the world was, before she snuggled her little black nose down between her paws and went to sleep. Of course there aint no likeness between a cat and a woman—I wouldn't dare to say so if I thought it—but often when I had finished some magazine

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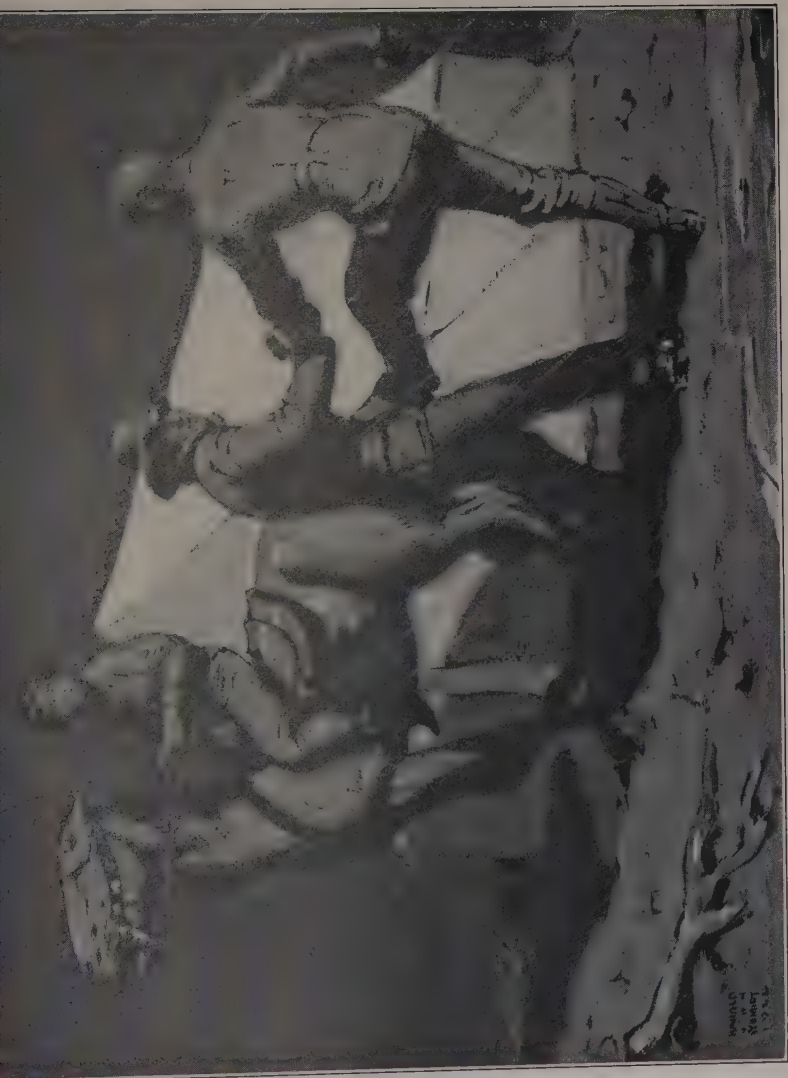
story I would light a cigarette and stare at old Blue and think about Dolores.

I wasn't quite ready to lose Dolores yet, nor I wasn't quite ready to keep her, but the time had just about come when I'd got to make up my mind about her. Several of the girls she went to school with had been and got married, which always makes a girl feel like a cull and a canner, and I could see signs that she reckoned she played the girl game out and was ready for something else. I — well, sometimes at night when the wind blowed and my tobacco didn't taste right I wanted her. I wanted her bad. I would set and wonder what it would be like to have her on my lap in old Blue's place—her hands on my shoulders and her face of a heavenly imp laughing down at me—and then I would shut my eyes and get sort of dizzy.

But, thinks I, opening my eyes and light-

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ing up again, how many times could that happen before it got tiresome? It was a safe bet that it did get tiresome, or else I had studied married folks with blind eyes for the last ten years. I had heard Dolores' sister, Chiquita, call Tuck Williams back to the door and remind him pretty sharp to kiss her goodby before they had been married six months, and they were supposed to be better matched than any other married team in town. As I made it out, married life soon got past being a gay game and settled down to a regular job like any other, only it was a job with no vacations and no chance to quit. If I got tired of old Blue clawing my knee and sizzling with love and happiness like a teakettle, all I had to do was to say "scat!" and she would evaporate and leave me alone without no argument, but if I tried to scat Dolores—well, I knowed Dolores too well to think of it without shivering.



"What are you trying to do?" he fussed kicking to free his leg.

SCAT!

The trouble was, I couldn't get away from Dolores' eyes. Old Blue's eyes were pretty in their way—little yellow-green circles, each with a black slit in the middle of it like the marks they put after cuss words in books—but they were shallow eyes, and I knowed there wasn't nothing behind them but a few notions about milk and mice and meat scraps and such matters. Dolores' eyes were deeper, worlds deeper, and back of them I could get glimpses of gay things and sad things, suns and thunderclouds, gardens and deserts and whole new countries and—what always got me the most excited—I reckoned that if I could see far enough back into them I would find a picture of myself. But she never would let me see that far, though I looked so hard sometimes that I would 'forget what she was saying. Loping alone along the road, with the sun in my face and the wind in my hat

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brim it would strike me that Dolores' eyes were just like any other woman's, after all, and that the finest thing any man could have happen to him was to be turned loose in the world without hobbles on, but when I was quiet again I would begin to wonder, and wonder, and wondering is always dangerous and likely to start something. Yes; I wondered what it would be like to have her on my lap in old Blue's place—her hands on shoulders, her face of a heavenly imp laughing down at me and nobody else but us two on this everlasting earth—and then I would get another one of them dizzy spells.

Tuck Williams' uncle had died a year or two before and left him a group of mining claims over in Manzanita canyon. Tuck didn't know as much about mining as a coyote does about plumbing but he wanted to do his duty to his uncle's memory, so he took his wife and baby and Dolores and went

SCAT!

over for a two weeks' camping trip to the canyon to size up the ground. Also, he took along a young mining engineer named Semple to expert the prospect holes for him. Also, he argued me into leaving old Blue and the cattle in charge of Harve Rucker and joining the party. He remarked that he didn't want to go camping with nobody but ladies of both sexes, which wasn't a kind thing to say about Semple but didn't displease me none. Semple was fresh out of college, with his hair brushed straight back so tight that it kept his eyebrows lifted, and he wore a nice suit of brown sunburn cloth with yellow laced boots.

"He's got a color scheme," said Tuck, "like these here saddle-colored breeds of hens, yellow legs and all, and he's a dude, but he knows rocks, and Dolores wanted him along—"

"Did she?" said I. "All right; I guess I can come."

SPIKE

Dolores had made a business of breaking in every new fellow that come to town and then handing him over to some other girl, so I didn't feel much oneasiness till I got better acquainted with Semple. He was dudish, as Tuck said, but he was smart and, though personally I didn't think much of his style of beauty, I reckon the onprejudiced public would have said he was good-looking. He had an entertaining way with girls that a man like me, living on the range, never gets a chance to learn, so when he was talking to Dolores the only thing I could do was to grunt and go out and rustle firewood for Chiquita. Of evenings by the fire I was just a saddle-marked, knee-sprung old friend-of-the-family, talking with Tuck about horses and men or playing with the baby when he happened to get a spell of staying awake, while Semple just naturally rode circles round Dolores with that swift tongue of his

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and kept her to himself. But I did get some chance to enjoy myself daytimes, when Tuck and Semple were busy pecking round the claims.

"Let's stay here on these rocks awhile before we go down to camp," she said one afternoon, balancing her slim self on a ledge as careless and easy as a mountain sheep, and then setting down with her feet hanging over nothing. "This is a nice place to watch the sun go to bed and, besides, I want to talk. I like to talk to you, Spike."

"Do you, Dolores," said I. "Honest?"

Quieter and gentler than usual, she stuck her feet out and looked at them in a thoughtful way. At that time I hadn't quite got used to seeing a girl's feet coming out at the bottoms of a man's breeches and leggins, but they looked pretty to me that way in spite of their queerness, as pretty as if they had been peeping out from under silk skirts.

SPIKE

All of a sudden I remembered old Blue as specially dull company. The dizziness begun to come on and I wanted Dolores. I wanted her bad.

"Yes; I like to talk to you, Spike," she went on. "You're sort of restful, like a sleepy old saddle horse or a bulgy old shoe."

Then the dizziness cleared out of my head some and I wasn't sure whether I wanted her or not. Old Blue might think such things but she was too good-hearted to say them.

"But this is the life, isn't it ,Spike?" said the imp, sniffing the wood smoke from the camp below and stretching out her arms as if she wanted to hug the mountains. "This seems to be what I was born for. It makes living in town seem like a mighty cheap imitation of life. I can't make Semple see it, though. He was raised in Saint Louis and he talks about the bright lights and says

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this is lonesome. Lonesome! Why, Spike, I often envy you, living out there on the ranch by yourself."

Something begun to bubble and jiggle below my throat and my head was swirling again.

"Could you live on a ranch all your life?" I shot out, "—a real ranch, I mean, like headquarters of the Lazy F outfit?"

"Oh, that's the house," she chirped. "Give me Navajo blankets and bearskin rugs, deer heads on the wall and a good fireplace, good mounts in the corral and running water in the kitchen. I could live in a house like that forever."

I shivered a little and leaned towards her as if ropes were pulling me.

"Dolores," says I, sort of choky, "Dolores, I—I wonder—"

I stopped to swallow and take breath and just then my ears caught some talk between

SPIKE

Chiquita and Tuck down in the tent. The words floated up very plain through the hot, still air.

"We'll be a little short this month," Tuck was saying. "I give fifty dollars to Satterlee for that pioneer monument fund."

"Fifty dollars!" said Chiquita with barb wire in her voice. "Ten would have been too much. What did the pioneers do for us?"

"Well, my dad was one of them, you know," said Tuck, in a backing-off, apologizing way. "And I'm a piker even at that. Satterlee give a hundred and Pickett give a hundred—"

"Satterlee and Pickett are both old men, with more money than they'll ever spend," cut in Chiquita.

"But I can't be a tightwad, dear," pleaded Tuck.

"Oh, no; I know you can't, but I can. I

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must!" went on Chiquita, her voice rising a few notches. "Just to save a couple of dollars I told that Mexican woman not to come and help me clean up the house any more. I made over my old blue dress the second time last week. I must scheme to save our money, so you can give it away with both hands. It isn't fair, Tuck Williams. You can always worry about pioneers and political campaigns and Armenians and one thing and another, but you're getting so you don't seem to think of your family."

About that time the baby thought it was time for him to join in the family conference, and he raised a howl.

"There, there, honey," cooed Chiquita. "Your mother still loves you, anyway."

Married life! Here was married life, the spittin' image of it! I straightened myself up and cleared my throat and begun to roll a cigarette. Old Blue looked pretty good to

SPIKE

me again. Dolores was setting quiet, staring out towards the west with a absent-minded look on her face and not seeming to hear the fuss down at the tent. Finally she sighed a little and glanced round.

"Yes?" she said. "What were you wondering about?"

"I was wondering," said I, lighting my smoke and snapping away the match, "if there aint cliff dwellings somewhere in these hills. It's a likely place for them. I've always wanted to get a cliff dweller's skull and stick it up in my setting-room to keep me company during my long, lonesome evenings at the ranch."

"You've got a queer taste in company," said Dolores, dropping her chin in her hands and kicking the side of the cliff with her heels.

There was a little scuffle of stones up the canyon and I seen Semple coming in from

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the claims with a sack of ore over his shoulder. I didn't like Semple. He was a standard article, of course—grade A, guaranteed and government inspected. His dad had fixed him up with an expensive education, so he could go through the world winning money in bunches by ways that I didn't understand at all. He was the sort of a guy that women like, but I didn't like him. I didn't like him! He was singing a silly little song and keeping step to it as he come down the trail.

“Mining, mining, mining,

Mining engineer—

I always take my whisky straight,

I'm a son-of-a-gun for beer!”

“College stuff!” I announced to the scenery. “Funny how a kid always tries to make out what a bad hombre he is. Kid stuff!”

“Perhaps,” said Dolores, “but it's a whole

SPIKE

lot more up-to-date than this old sentimental stuff, like 'Juanita.' "

"Juanita" was one of my particular songs. I had sung it the night before while we were setting round the fire. Women always get so personal in arguments. Old Blue never got personal except when she purred, and then her claw-digging was never intended to hurt my feelings.

"I see," said I. "You don't like to hear your sleepy old saddle horse whinny nor your bulgy old shoe squeak. I expect mebbe it is a tiresome noise."

"I guess I'm made that way, Spike," she said, sad and sweet. "I soon get tired of anything that is old or slow."

"Slow?" asks I of the scenery.

"Slow," she echoes back. "Come, it must be near supper time."

I followed her down to the tents and then got my horse and saddled him up.

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"Where you going this time of day?" asked Tuck.

"Down to the OR ranch," I answered. "The old man wanted me to look over a bunch of yearling she-stuff down there. I'll be back tomorrow, or sometime, if something else don't come up."

I glanced at Dolores, with my toe in the stirrup, but she was awful busy peeling a kettle of potatoes and didn't look up, so I rode down the canyon and over the hill towards the OR. The sun was gone by now. The mountains round the edge of the range were blue, the fluffy gray shadows were crawling up in every gulch and 'royo and hollow, aiming to overrun the country as soon as the yellow light died out in the west, and the world was awful big and wide and still and lonesome. I done it without thinking.

"Wilt thou no-ot, relenting,
For thine a-absent lover sigh?"

SPIKE

Poof! I spit the song out of my mouth, along with a cussword. I wished I was back at the ranch with old Blue or some place else where the women cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.

It was just about the same time next night when I passed the same place on the back trail. I had aimed to go home from the OR but I happened to think of a piece of business that I wanted to talk over with Tuck in camp. As I rode along the canyon I was watching a surprising thing ahead—a big cloud that was bulging up above the mountains with a speed and a blackness that looked like business. It was only the first of July and the cloud was out of place. 'The rains aint due in these parts till about the tenth. It's the custom of the country not to have no rain except about six weeks in the year, but when we do have rain we don't get it through the spigot; the bottom simply drops

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out of the barrel and after about fifteen minutes of it the whole range comes up half drowned and gasping for breath.

Manzanita canyon only runs a trickle of water most of the year but, thought I, looking up at the stretch of mountains it drained, it must carry a fair-sized river after one of them busting showers. The camp was—gosh! what a location for a camp during the rains! A couple of fools named Spike Saddler and Tuck Williams had set it in a little basin-like, just above where two big towers of rock stuck out and made a kind of a narrow gateway, and it come to me that I had noticed a line of drift stuff on the side hill a good six feet above where the tents were pitched

Flash! went the lightning up ahead, flickering round the silvery edges of the swelling cloud. M-m-m-br-r-r! bellowed the thunder behind the ridge, like a mad bull hunting a

SPIKE

place to break through a fence. I slipped old Jerry a couple of jabs and speeded up, riding with my eyes mostly on the sky and leaving him to pick his way through the dusk. Pretty soon I sighted the little ranch, about a mile below camp, where we got our milk and eggs, and there was 'Tuck's team and wagon hitched at the gate. When I had hopped off and stuck my head in the kitchen door I found Tuck and Chiquita and the baby setting there, listening to the rancher's phonograph.

"Where's Dolores?" I barked, making them jump.

"Hello!" says Tuck. "Why she's at camp."

"Where's Semple?" I barked again.

"He was still out on the claims when I left," answered Tuck, noticing the look on my face and coming to the door. "He ought to be in camp by now, onless he's gone up the gulch to talk to that old prospector. Why?"

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I drug him out by the shirtsleeve and pointed to the bulging, flaring cloud, that now shut out half the sky. Tuck knowed the country and it's styles of weather, and he give me a shove.

"Go!" he snapped above a roll of thunder. "Get out of this! I'll come as fast as the team can follow."

When a storm comes at you across a big flat it pokes along and growls about what it is going to do to you for an hour before anything happens, but coming up behind a range of mountains, it just takes a running jump and lands on you. Before Jerry and I got half way to camp we were fighting through a blinding swirl of wind and water, one second all bluish glare and the next blacker than the inside of an ink bottle. Jerry was a good horse and knowed his business, which was lucky. I couldn't see nothing for light, couldn't hear nothing for noise, couldn't

SPIKE

hardly draw breath, but I was going, going, going to that camp. More specially, I was going to that girl, and I reckon I'd have gone anyway, Jerry or no Jerry. I pray sometimes, and through that blinding, roaring half-mile I was a whole prayer meeting by myself, with the thunder hollering amens.

Praying counts, all right. I made it. Pretty soon Jerry splashed and stumbled into knee-deep running water and a flash showed me the big towers on either side of us. The basin seemed to be under water but the women's tent, on a little rise of ground, was still high and dry with a candle glimmering inside of it. And just then I heard a sound up towards the mountain that made me slide out of the saddle and tear open the tied tent flap like a crazy man.

Dolores was there. Oh yes, she was there, but Semple was standing beside her and when I popped my head and shoulders

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through the torn tent flap she—grabbed his coat lapels and snuggled up to him and his arm went round her! They could have made a long speech and said less than that little movie scene did. He was her man and she was his woman, and I was a plumb outsider. All along that last half-mile I had been a praying saint, but now, in a second, I turned into a half-drowned devil.

“Out o’ this!” I roared. “Don’t stand there like fools!”

“What do you mean?” asked Semple.

“Flood coming down the mountain,” I hollered. “Oh, move! move!”

I snatched at them and drug them out like a couple of bundles of old clothes, tossed Dolores up in the saddle and then grabbed Semple’s leg.

“Get up behind her and hit for the hill!” I snarled.

“What are you trying to do?” he fussed,

SPIKE

not understanding me, kicking to free his leg and delaying the game so I was more on the prod than ever.

“Crawl up that horse, damn you!” I bawled, “or I’ll throw you over him.”

Another second and he was up, and I give old Jerry’s hip a wallop with my wet hat and started them off. Then I just folded my arms and stood and watched, while the lightning helped me keep track of them. I wanted to see them make the side hill—mebbe. At least I wanted that if I wanted anything. If I seen them safe it didn’t matter what else was on the program. It wouldn’t interest me.

“Wilt thou not, relenting,

For thine absent lover sigh?”

Serve her right! In years to come she would cry and make life miserable for Semple every time she thought of this night. Serve ’em both— Then it hit me, the wall of water I

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had been expecting, but before it cut my feet from under me I got a blurred snapshot of old Jerry clawing up the side hill under his double load.

I have rode some tolerable lively horses, but that flood had them all beat. It bucked and pitched and it sunfished; it r'ared and it rolled and it fell over backwards; it jolted me and it jammed me and spun me and twisted me. I must have kept my arms and legs going through it all, though, for after a while I found myself laying half out of the water with my ears full of bells, my mouth full of the taste of mud and a jabbing pain in my side which I didn't know whether it was a broken rib or a broken heart. I drug myself up out of the water and flopped against the foot of a rock, hoping death wouldn't be much longer about it.

"Spike! Oh-h, Spike!"

Angels calling me, mebbe, though I'm in a peach of a temper to meet angels.

SPIKE

"Oh, Spike!"

That's Dolores. Sure enough; she wants to tell me about them being engaged and I'll have to give 'em my blessing before I die. Oh, Lord! why didn't death get here sooner?

"Spike!"

"Hyar!" I yelled and then grabbed my side and give a splintery groan as somebody swooped down out of the dark and caught hold of me.

"Spike, is it you? Oh, you poor old boy!" she mourned, raising me up against the rock. "Are you hurt much? How do you feel?"

"I feel—pretty wet," I grunted, between short breaths.

"Tuck will be coming," she fired over her shoulder at Semple. "Go down the canyon and meet him and bring him here."

"I don't like that chap, Spike," she said in my ear, as he turned away. "The minute we got ashore he tried to make love to me. He

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didn't seem to care whether you drowned or not."

"Did you?" said I.

"Oh, what can I do with you," she quivered in a queer voice. "You're such an old bat. You've been stone blind in daylight for the last six months, and now you can't see in the dark as a bat should."

"Dolores, do you mean that?" I asked, straightening up forgetting to die.

Then it all came true—her hands on my shoulders, her face of a heavenly imp laughing—and crying—down at me; and then a wisp of wet hair across my eyes and her rainy, teary cheek against mine. Did I ever sniff and snort at this marrying stuff? I don't know. If I had any objections at that minute, they whiffed up and away like cigarette papers in a whirlwind, and I swear that the flood water roaring down the canyon in the stormy dark sung the doxology. Poor old Blue had lost out for good.

